A DELL BOOK

DELL

204

THE FRIGHTENED PIGEON

Richard Burke

WITH CRIME MAP ON BACK COVER

A DELL MYSTERY

THE FRIGHTENED PIGEON

Persons this *Story* is about—

VALERIE BRIGHT,
young and lovely specialty dancer, has gone to Vichy, France, after a flaming triumph in Paris because she would rather have Ching Dillon than all the glory in the theatrical universe. Right now she is not having much of either.

CHING DILLON,
an American foreign correspondent who rates news ahead of everything else, including Val, has gray eyes which tell more than his words and a mouth that can be at once twinkling and grim. He's always dashing off to adjust some social maladjustment, and a girl can have him only for brief intervals. But what intervals!

LUIS,
a Spanish boy who, at 17, has his life behind him. He has the saddest eyes that Val has ever seen, a slight, undernourished body, and a face that is a singular mask of age. He serves Ching tirelessly, and he gets a new last name from time to time.

LOTUS NEDRY,
a foreign correspondent who is good-looking but not very popular. She is something of a mystery, has entrée into diplomatic circles, and now and then sets out a rare dish of scandal. She is much too interested in things which don't concern her.

JURGENS SAMPSON,
Lotus' correspondent boy friend, is short and stout and has furtive eyes in a none-too-pleasant face. He has been in Europe only a short time, but long enough to have gained a reputation for double-crossing his friends.

COLONEL KURT VON STAMM,
a stiff, stocky, cold-eyed German, rather dull and unimaginative, has been commanded by his father, against his own wishes, to find a [illegible]iary.

CORPORAL OTTO FLEBER,
of the *Kommandant's* staff in Paris, is Von Stamm's brains. Tall and lean, he has sharp eyes in a face which is always composed. The first joint of his index finger is missing.

ANTOINE LEGARDE,
manager of the Café Abbaye, is a huge man with eyes almost lost in his fleshy face. A kindly person with an amazing flow of language, he regrets a moral weakness in his make-up.

DULONNE,
of the French underground, is a small, pleasant-eyed man who is well acquainted with the treacherous Old Harbor district in Marseilles.

HERMAN SCHLEGEL,
a stocky and rather stupid Bavarian, is out to prove himself a privileged member of a master race.

CAPTAIN TILSEN,
Schlegel's superior, is in charge of secret police work in Marseilles.

THE FRIGHTENED PIGEON

What this *Story* is about—

Valerie Bright was scared—from the top of her lovely tawny head right down to the toes of her dancing feet. She had never been really afraid before and she had never been really touched by the War until Ching Dillon, an American correspondent, got hold of the dynamite-laden diary of old General von Stamm.

Ching Dillon was Valerie's man, and Ching was the reason why Val was marking time in Vichy, France, in the momentous month of November, 1942, instead of being safely back on Broadway.

Up to now Val hasn't had to worry about anything much except working out new dance routines. And that doesn't give a girl much background for coping with the sheer terror of trying to outwit the dread Gestapo. Val soon learns, the hard way, that trying to deceive those who are well grounded in deception is an item which has been omitted from her curriculum.

Even before she begins her terrifying journey to Marseilles, things begin to happen which convince her that she is Ching's thoroughly frightened pigeon. She has no desire to become just a memory, and the thought of taking Ching's ashes back to New York in an urn doesn't appeal to her either. However, as she works in the vault with the worm's-eye view of a [illegible], "Every time I kick about anything, it gets worse."

Things do get worse, but fast, for this pretty dancer who pits her wits against a series of tough, smart customers who get in her way during the course of a dangerous and exciting mission which begins in Vichy and aims—with a torrid interlude in Marseilles—for the Spanish border.

Here is a whacking yarn in the great tradition of suspense stories. Swift action, inspired characterization, and a treasure hunt with a new twist all combine to make this story tops in its field.

A STORY OF TERROR AND SUSPENSE

THE FRIGHTENED PIGEON

By RICHARD BURKE

Author of "The Fourth Star,"
"The Dead Take No Bows,"
"Here Lies the Body,"
"Chinese Red," etc.

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THE FRIGHTENED PIGEON

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The Frightened Pigeon

Chapter One: THE MISSING DIARY

CORPORAL OTTO FLEBER, attached to the *Kommandant's* headquarters staff in Paris, in November, 1942, tilted his swivel chair back against the thin wall which separated his cubicle-like space from General von Stamm's office. The small room assigned to him had been originally a part of the general's office, and hadn't been a very good partitioning job, unless from the viewpoint of Corporal Fleber. His sharp eyes roved over the papers on the neat desk before him, but his expression was that of listening. By placing his head close to the wall he could hear practically all that was spoken in the larger room.

The bit of eavesdropping he was engaged in now seemed of more than casual interest to the corporal. The voices sifting through the wall he identified as those of General von Stamm, the *Kommandant,* and his son. The younger man was speaking.

"But, my father, I do not understand. You tell me that a dispatch case containing important papers has been stolen from your office, and therefore you have sent for me—a colonel of artillery. Such a happening is a matter for our police."

"The documents were of no particular importance," growled the general's voice.

"Then I am still more puzzled."

The younger von Stamm managed to work a trace of criticism into his tone. The sound reaching Corporal Fleber's ears might have been an old man's sigh.

"There was another object in the case of great personal importance to me," boomed the general's voice. "The journal of events I have been keeping. My diary."

"If you will excuse my saying so, father, a lost diary doesn't seem a world-shaking matter."

There was a short silence. Corporal Fleber rubbed the tip of his index finger against his chin. It was a mere stub of a finger, of which the first joint was missing. The general's voice rumbled again: "You are a member of the Party, Kurt. I am not, as

you know. In the matter of loyalty, I am aware that the younger generation gives its preference to the Party—"

"The Party is above all, sir. Heil Hitler!"

Corporal Fleber heard what sounded like a grunt of disapproval, but no echoing "heil."

"That is what I fear, why I am slow to give you my entire confidence. This diary is not a record of schoolboy affairs. If it should fall into the hands of Herr Goebbels, the result would be extremely uncomfortable to me!"

Corporal Fleber's sharp eyes glittered unpleasantly and the corners of his thin lips curled contemptuously.

"I see." Colonel von Stamm's voice was crisply short. "You have written indiscreetly in this diary—"

"*Ja!* Worse than indiscreet. I have been critical of many of the orders which I have carried out, even though faithfully executed. This book, falling into the hands of our Party chiefs, cannot fail to end in my being disgraced—perhaps even in a visit from Herr Himmler. I suggest that some of this may fall on you, my son."

"I am not accountable for the indiscretions of my father!" disclaimed the colonel.

"Your Party chiefs will not be so logical, Kurt."

Corporal Fleber again smiled grimly, with an almost imperceptible nod, and shifted to a more comfortable position in the swivel chair.

"What is it you wish me to do?" demanded Kurt von Stamm, irritably.

"Recover the dispatch case—or at the least, the diary."

"That may not be so easy," retorted the younger man. "As I have said, I am a colonel of artillery—not a policeman. The Gestapo—"

"The Gestapo is not to be considered! For me, it would be a disaster should they recover my book. This you must do, if not to serve your father, to serve yourself. Understand, Kurt, I do not accept the theory that the son owes a greater duty to his political affiliations than to his father, but if he so believes, then the father will be justified in taking necessary measures to defend himself. I assure you, Kurt, that this would be unpleasant to you."

"What is it you wish me to do?" reiterated Kurt after another short silence. "When was the case stolen?"

"A few hours ago—while I was absent at lunch. A rat of an underground Frenchman, or so I believe him to be, was seized while coming from his office a few moments before I returned. I ordered him locked up securely in a room in this building until I could examine my office. The dispatch case was kept in this drawer, but when I looked for it, it was gone."

"I would not have considered that drawer a secure place for such an article." The younger man's tone was coldly critical. "Surely, there were better places for it."

"The drawer was locked."

Something that sounded like a snort filtered through the thin wall to Corporal Fleber's ears.

"With a discarded nail I could open such a lock in a moment of time! Well, you have the thief, you say."

"I have not the case, though. It is clear there was a confederate, possibly stationed on the next roof, which, you will observe, is lower than this floor. A simple matter to drop the case from my window. At all events, the case was passed in some manner to another person."

"Have you a plan? Have you questioned the Frenchman you caught?"

"Naturally. He denies everything. He claims to have entered my office through error—states he was looking for the office which issues permits to cross the demarcation line. A very good story, as this office is directly beneath my own. But he is not to be believed. The case is gone—and he entered my office at a moment when the guard was distracted by a noise at the window at the farther end of the hall, obviously created for the very purpose of making it possible for this man to gain unobserved admittance."

Corporal Fleber pursed his lips, then a faint, gravelly chuckle escaped them.

"I see," observed the colonel.

"Instead of turning the man over to our police, I am going to release him at seven tonight, with the permit he pretends to desire, to travel into unoccupied territory. This on the pretext that his story has been accepted. Meanwhile I will arrange a

leave for you and there is sufficient time to make whatever arrangements you need. You will not lose sight of this Frenchman. He will lead you to his confederates, eventually."

"But, my father, this is too much to be accomplished alone! It may take several days, and I am not so clever at these things."

The general cleared his throat noisily. "You may have whatever assistance you require, Kurt," he said. "The only matter of concern is that the book must be recovered by you personally. Your aids will assist only in locating it."

"This is a command?"

"It is a command, from the *Kommandant* of Paris, and from your father. If, for mistaken ideas of Party loyalty, you betray me, I assure you that you will not be untouched by the consequent disaster. For all concerned, it is better you follow my instructions."

"I will do it!" The military tone was now in Kurt von Stamm's voice. "But only on one consideration."

"That is?"

"If I am able to return this idiotic diary to you, that it will then be instantly and in my own sight destroyed!"

The general agreed, and probably it was a decision he had made privately immediately upon discovering his loss. Corporal Fleber, hearing the hall door to the general's office close behind the departing son, sat up straight again and applied himself to the work on his desk. His mind didn't seem entirely occupied with what he was doing, however.

Presently a buzzer summoned him into General von Stamm's office. He got up and went in, walking stiffly and properly to the old man's desk, punctuating his arrival with a click of the heels.

"Corporal Fleber, I have observed that you are a man of intelligence and discretion," said von Stamm, his praise somewhat modified by the dubious expression in his eyes.

"Thank you, sir. I try—"

"I am sending you on a mission of considerable delicacy," the general interrupted. "Report to my son, Colonel Kurt von Stamm, in the lobby of this building at six tonight. Wear civilian clothes. Your instructions will come from him and you will execute them without question. A successful conclusion of this

mission will earn promotion for you. That is all. You are now excused from your duties here."

A half hour later Corporal Fleber was threading the maze of narrow streets across the Seine. In the Rue Remilly he turned into the small Hotel Meury. The foyer seemed a popular lounging place for Germans in uniform, but these uniforms were not of the *Wehrmacht*—the regular army.

After looking around, Corporal Fleber located a man who wore no uniform of any sort, but whose mien suggested he didn't consider himself any the less important. His reply to Corporal Fleber's greeting indicated that they were very well acquainted. At all events they were closeted together in an upstairs room for a long time before the dapper corporal reappeared in the lobby.

There was a small gleam of complete satisfaction in the corporal's eyes as he strode to the entrance and out into the Rue Remilly.

Chapter Two: A BROKEN DATE

VALERIE BRIGHT, perched on a high bar stool, heels hooked over a rung, glanced at an ormolu clock on the back shelf of André's tiny bar just as the minute hand jerked to nine. She stirred restlessly.

Nine o'clock—and no Ching. No dinner, either. He had promised to meet her at eight in this small cellar café near the Carlton, a popular hangout for newsmen stationed in Vichy. André served food not to be found on the menus of law-abiding places. Where and how he obtained it was conceded by his clientele to be strictly his own affair.

Val glanced across the room toward a flight of steep stairs leading down from the sidewalk and frowned. It was outrageous how Ching Dillon ignored his appointments when it didn't suit him to keep them. Of course, he'd always insisted his engagements had to be on a provisional basis. News came ahead of anything else. Val didn't quite understand why, either, as it seemed uniformly bad. Anyhow, news, for her, was just something to talk about at dinner, or over a drink, for lack of anything better. It wasn't really personal at all. Love—well, love was

something far more vital, even if Ching didn't seem to agree.

His by-line was Charles John Dillon, but it wasn't often anyone called him that. In Spain during the revolution, because personal cleanliness was difficult to maintain in the war-torn villages, he'd shaved his head. This, together with a slight upward twirk at the ends of his eyebrows, gave him the look of someone made up as a Chinese. The boys called him Ching John for a while, and simply Ching ever since, although his hair had long ago grown back to normal.

In the winter of '38-'39 he arrived in Paris, flaming with indignation at Falangist brutality, while Valerie Bright was registering a flaming triumph on the stage of the Casino de Paris. She had come to France with a contract to dance in her purse and adventure in her heart. More than anything else, though, she had wanted this season in Paris to bring her up to the social level of those girls in Manhattan theaterdom who'd already been abroad and were therefore a bit snooty toward their untraveled contemporaries.

Valerie hadn't expected any such success. Her dancing talent was more native than cultured, but her figure was glamorous and, coupled with her bright-eyed expression of a child doing something just mastered, brought heart-warming results. Naïveté, perhaps, but natural to her personality.

Ching Dillon, having sat, seen, and been conquered by all this, sought her out. An indirect approach wouldn't have been in his style. Precipitately deserting his seat and companions while Val was still taking her bows, he made his way backstage.

She had no more than enveloped herself in a dressing-gown when she heard her maid in loud and Gallic expostulation. Then a determined male voice, one that prevailed. Probably an agent, she thought. She saw gray eyes looking at her with the expression of an art student gazing at a master's work, and a mouth that could at once be grim and twinkling in the corners.

"You—are superb!" he greeted her.

"And who are you?" she had inquired coldly, nevertheless hoping he was someone proper for her to know.

He told her briefly, then began talking about her. They had spent some time on that subject. Later that night—much later—they'd taken up again, after the lights in the Casino were out

and costumes hanging in scented darkness. Breakfast at Neuilly. An enchanted morning, separation for needed sleep, with dinner at eight to look forward to—

Dinner at eight! That time he'd been prompt in his appearance. But tonight—four years afterward—he'd failed to show up at all, leaving Val to perch on an uncomfortable bar stool in André's, toying with a slim glass of anisette— And Valerie Bright would rather have Ching Dillon than all the glory in the theatrical universe. She wasn't getting either.

In the September following their meeting the war had broken with admittedly dull thunder. Ching, earlier, had spent much time in dashing off to Berlin, Munich, Prague, and other places of no particular interest to Val, and she'd not seen nearly enough of him. Once she'd gone by invitation to dance for Hitler—or that was the Fuehrer's impression. She had accepted the bid only because she knew Ching was somewhere in that vicinity and she hadn't heard from him for some weeks. Hitler didn't excite her at all. He bore to her a marked resemblance to a Mr. Glank who'd attended the plumbing deficiencies of her home in Terre Haute from time to time. She hadn't seen Ching. He was at that moment in Warsaw, she found out later.

Just as she'd anticipated, the war didn't change things in Paris at all. Ching had urged her to go home, but Val hadn't seen any reason why she should. Life in Paris went on as usual. She made several trips to the front with entertainment groups, to dance for soldiers who seemed to be doing nothing much but sitting around in uncomfortable quarters. They ceased being bored when she danced. It was entirely silly, she had decided, to take all these fellows away from their homes and scatter them around in such inaccessible places just because some stuffy diplomats had declared war.

Ching didn't think so. He said the Allies were acting like cultured idiots in not attacking Germany with everything they had before Hitler chose to move westward. Ching had very likely been right, she reflected. At least, when the Nazis did decide, nothing seemed to stop them.

The German flood swept over France, but didn't immediately affect Val's little world. The Casino de Paris kept on, with "hochs" gradually supplanting "encores." She didn't like

the new audiences very well, hadn't cared for their stamping of feet and concerted, guttural shouts of approval. That was the trouble, she thought. These Nazis did everything that way. No individualism. They did things as a group or not at all.

Then to Vichy. A dull little place at any time, one-third the size of her native Terre Haute and not a tenth as gay. But Ching had gone there after Petain selected the town as a base to carry on his futile masque of government. Even to an American dancer with no political perception at all it was a poor mummery. She had wondered about all those little Frenchmen wearing rusty frock coats, who bustled in and out of le Parc and other hotels occupied by Petain's government. Invariably they carried portfolios or dispatch cases and looked tremendously important.

"Small-fry bureaucrats," Ching had told her bitterly. "Little worms, really, the sort that live in coffins. All that is important to them is their jobs and their pensions, even while France is dying."

Valerie sighed and glanced again at the ormolu clock. Now it was 9:30. Even a girl caught in the loose strands of an unsatisfactory love affair needs to be fed. Ching wasn't going to show up—that was becoming only too clear—and Val didn't like eating alone. She looked around. Several of the diners were acquaintances.

At a table near the stairs sat Lotus Nedry and Jurgens Sampson, both writers. Lotus Nedry, although definitely a good-looking woman, wasn't very popular with the boys, but she always seemed to have one in tow whether he liked it or not. She was a bit of a mystery, too. What her background was no one claimed to know, but she had entrée in diplomatic circles, and occasionally set out a rare dish of scandal for the readers back home who weren't in a position to sift facts. Perhaps they wouldn't have cared, anyhow.

Her companion, Jurg Sampson, hadn't been in Europe very long, but quite long enough to get himself excluded from the camaraderie of the foreign correspondents. He'd gained a reputation for double-crossing his friends.

Seated at a round table, similar to but smaller than the famous one in the Algonquin, were three men more favorably

known to Val. They were also correspondents, and had urged the dancer to join them when they came in. A pair of women Val didn't know were with them and she hadn't felt like joining the party on that account. She was in no mood for strange women, and at the moment still expected Ching. The only other person she recognized was a little Frenchman, Louis Guigon. Louis, sitting alone and morosely regarding his drink, would have been very happy to take dinner with anyone who'd also take his check.

She saw Bob Gregory then, coming down the stairs from the sidewalk. Another newsman, but not one who thought the universe rested on his shoulders. She'd have dinner with Bob, if he asked her—and Val believed she could manage that. He stopped just before reaching the bottom step to survey the scene in the restaurant, then spotted Val and came across the room in long, springy steps.

"Hi, urchin!" he greeted. Then added, "Where's Ching?" People always tagged that onto their greeting.

"You're asking me," responded Val. Her voice, while pleasantly husky, had made obligatory her choice of dancing as a medium of dramatic expression. "He sent me a message asking me to meet him here at eight, but as usual he hasn't shown up. I'm starved."

"For food?" There was a quizzical gleam in his eyes.

"For lots of things." Val's eyes rolled around and came to rest on the glass her fingers toyed with. "Just now, it's for food. Dinner? Dutch, of course. Or have you had yours?"

"I haven't. And it won't be Dutch. My dough's just arrived, so I pay."

Val shrugged. She wouldn't insist. Curious, she thought, why men she liked seldom had any money while those she didn't seemed always to have plenty. Bob was different. She liked him, and he frequently was in funds.

Bob seated her at a table near the bar, amid a concentration of envious stares from the unattached males present—some from males who weren't unattached.

"What can you serve us that is both illicit and good?" Bob asked the waiter in reasonably good French.

Biftek was to be had, the waiter said, of bovine rather than

equine origin, the latter being about all the hotels could provide.

"Someone's cow has died?" asked Bob, morosely.

"It was Babette, the young cow of Pierre Gourdin. She was about to be requisitioned by the *boche,*" replied the waiter. "A very nice cow, I have heard."

"Let's not get too deep in Babette's personality. It is enough to know that she led a decent life and wasn't too old. Steaks Babette we will have."

Bob outlined an attractive menu to think about, even if they didn't get it all—as was likely. He turned to Val as the waiter went away. "So Ching didn't show up?"

"He seldom does to keep a date," complained Val. "Only when he isn't expected."

"That is probably the basis of his charm for you. Val, my love, you are a dope!"

Val nodded agreeably. "Of course. Isn't a girl in love always a dope?"

Bob considered. "Well, practically always," he agreed. "Tell me, what has Ching Dillon got that lots of other men haven't?"

"Me."

Bob laughed. "What's wrong with me? I am young, moderately handsome, and have a good job. I'd never stand you up."

"You're nice," conceded Val.

"Yeah, pet. Nice, with a heart of gold and no girl to warm it. So the best I get is the privilege of buying dinner for the best-looking American girl in Vichy because her boy friend hasn't shown up."

"You don't have to buy dinner for me, Bob. Anyhow, I haven't much competition—there aren't many American girls in Vichy."

"The smart gals all scrammed before the Nazis came." Bob scowled at her. "Why didn't you?"

"I'm not smart—and I didn't want to." Val studied her companion's face a moment, then continued. "What chance have I for Ching, Bob?"

"Slim. A girl will never rate better than place money with Charles John Dillon. He's too world conscious—"

"Not all the time," objected Val. "He gets girl conscious now

and then."

"If a girl can't keep a man in line before marriage, how's she gonna do it afterward?" demanded Bob. "Suppose you do get him to the altar in an unguarded moment. What'll that get you? Ching will always be dashing off somewhere to adjust some social maladministration."

"He wouldn't be dashing off to adjust other women, though."

"Well, if I were a wife, I'd rather fight off other dames than I would all suffering mankind. The odds are shorter. You'd never know when you sat down to dinner with him whether he'd still be there by the time you served the coffee."

Val, who seemed to have been studying the remains of her dinner, looked up hopefully. "Coffee?" she asked irrelevantly. "It's been months—a lot of months—since I've had any coffee. Do you suppose there is any?"

Bob snorted. "You're evading the issue. You refuse to see the picture of unhappiness I'm drawing—"

"Oh, I know what you mean. Ching would always be going off somewhere and leaving me alone." Val lifted her thin eyebrows resignedly. "But, still, I would have him between times."

"For brief intervals."

"But what intervals!" Val sighed and her eyes sparkled.

"From here, I'd say you were a girl that could use a full-time man."

"A little of what you want is better than loads of what you don't."

Bob banged his fist on the table top. Now he wanted a drink, to drown out the insolence of being classified among the things Valerie Bright didn't want.

"That's me!" he exclaimed. "A lot of what you have no yen for." To the waiter who had scuttled up alongside the table: "Bring me strong drink, Hippolyte."

"Baptiste, m'sieu'—not Hippolyte," corrected the waiter. "Wisskee?"

"Wisskee, with soda." Bob pushed away what remained of his allotment of Babette. "A drink, Val?"

"No." This wasn't a party, and parties were about the only time Val drank anything. She returned to the subject: "I didn't say I had no yen for you, Bob."

"Obviously, you haven't," he replied bitterly. "I've never had a bit of luck with any girl who had her eye on some other lug—and all the ones I've wanted uniformly did have."

Val smiled slowly. "You won't ever have, Bobbo," she replied. "When a girl is truly in love with one man, she won't turn to another until she is definitely assured she's in a blind alley."

"Don't call me Bobbo," resisted Bob. "Sounds like one of those games they play in church basements back home—with prizes. You *are* in a blind alley, Val, but you haven't found it out yet. I'll stick around till you get to the end of it."

Val ignored his assertion. "There isn't going to be any coffee. I think—I'm going home. I need to wash out some—things."

"To Terre Haute?" Bob ignored the laundry item.

She shook her head, tawny curls shaking. "To the Rue Brisson."

"I'll walk around with you."

"No. I'd rather you stayed here to tell Ching I've gone home —if he comes."

Bob made an expansive gesture. "They also serve who only sit and wait," he misquoted.

"For something better to come along," Val said, getting up.

Bob Gregory said nuts and ordered another whisky while helping her with her coat. Val pulled her fur around her neck and started for the stairs to the street. She saw Jurg Sampson coming from his table as though to intercept her, Lotus Nedry's cynical eyes following him. He caught her as she reached the stairway. "Leaving?"

Val stared at him coolly, then nodded. "Just in time," she murmured.

"In time for what?"

"To keep out of bad company," she replied. "Father always said I should."

He grinned amiably. "Where's Ching?"

"I don't know." She started up the stairs. "Sorry—got to hurry now."

Jurg Sampson watched her upward progress for a moment, then returned to his table and Lotus Nedry.

"Said she didn't know," he reported. "Probably she doesn't."

"Perhaps," returned Lotus vaguely. "But how is one to keep anyone in sight without seeing him in the first place?"

The fine rain which had persisted all evening had at least come to an interlude as Val came up to the street level, but the pavement was still wet. She crossed over after reaching the corner to use the covered walk alongside the Vieux-Parc as far as the Casino, then rounding the huge, dark building scurried past the row of shops and across the Parc Hôpital to the entrance of the Rue Brisson beyond.

The street was narrow, dark, and wet as Val turned into it, practically tiptoeing by reason of the stilted heels she affected because men looked at her feet. She wasn't afraid. Startling things were always happening to other people, but somehow she felt that nothing would happen to her. She had lived in an impersonal world ever since she had left Indiana—and even before, for that matter. There wasn't anything she need be frightened of, since nothing which surrounded her actually concerned her, even though events swirled about like a spring shower. No one would wish to harm her for the simple reason that there couldn't be any motive.

Except Charles John Dillon. But he didn't hurt by intention —only because he didn't realize that he sometimes did. Val wanted to be treasured, cherished, and preferred. Lots of men would have been delighted to give her all of this, but unluckily hadn't been the ones she wanted.

These underground movements! They were Ching Dillon's dish—and Europe was honeycombed with them. Val disliked underground people—they never seemed to be very clean, the ones she'd met here and there with Ching. But Ching was utterly fascinated and coupled them with the impending doom of Fascists and Nazis. Val's personal reaction was that the latter seemed to be doing very well indeed, and she hadn't the hate for them that Ching had. Of course, after the Axis had decided to include the United States in the war, she had regarded them as enemies, but there wasn't anything personal about her feeling.

Val arrived at the entrance of her pension without getting very wet, although the rain had started again. The building, ranged around a courtyard, was quite an old one, built in 1740

Val had been told when she engaged her rooms. She wasn't much impressed by that, but thought they might have done a little more about the plumbing while building. What there was of it was fantastic.

She pulled the bell cord and backed against the wall for an indifferent survey of the dark street. These nightly blackouts were silly, she thought. No one was going to bomb Vichy, and why should it matter to the French that there were nights when R.A.F. bombers crossed over to strafe Italian towns? Italy had not been kind to France.

A dark figure leaning against a tree across and a little farther up the street caught her eye. She wouldn't have seen him at all if he hadn't seized this instant to light a cigarette, and in that brief interval only saw enough to envisage a slight and poorly dressed man, with a beret pulled down over one side of his face. Another waif, she thought. France was filled with them.

Papa Bec, the concierge, opened the gate to admit her. So far as Val could see, he opened the gate to admit anyone at any time without question. It wasn't very clear to her just what he was for. He always had been nice to her, though.

Val clacked across the courtyard to the stairs leading up to the gallery on which her apartment faced. Papa Bec, after standing a moment, following her progress with a residual gleam in his rheumy eyes, sighed and turned away toward his own quarters with the reflection that it was clearly a maladministration of providence to remove a man's prowess and not take desire along with it.

Before fishing in her bag for keys, Val tried the door. She'd never been careful in locking doors behind her, so she wasn't surprised when the door opened readily. She went on in and discovered a light in her bedroom, connected to this room by a short hall. Without considering that an intruder might not appreciate being disturbed, she walked into the bedroom to investigate.

The light from a single candle burning on her bedside table revealed a dark figure standing in the curtains at the side of a window, staring out at the street below. He turned his head as she stopped in the doorway and she saw it was Ching Dillon.

"Hello, pigeon," he said.

"I thought we had a dinner date at André's," she said. "At eight."

Ching came around the chaise longue, helping himself to one of her slender store of American cigarettes en route. He paused to light it with deliberate care.

"We did have," he said, dropping the match on an ash tray. "But things have been happening."

Things always did, reflected Val. She pulled off her hat, dropped it onto a marble-topped bureau, and then shook her hair down. Thus adjusted to her notion of indoor décor, she turned to face Ching.

Chapter Three: CARRIER PIGEON

"Two HOURS I spent at André's waiting for you!" Val deposited her damp fur alongside the hat on the littered bureau.

"There are worse places for waiting." Ching put his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her down onto the chaise longue. "You had dinner? Not alone?"

"With Bob Gregory." She thought a moment, then added, "He says I'm a dope to waste time on you."

"My friend, Bob!" Ching blew smoke high into the air, his chin tilted back. Val wished he would sit down. It always made her nervous to have anyone standing before her like this, especially anyone as tall as Ching. He laughed good-naturedly. "Bob couldn't be right, could he?"

"I wouldn't know, would I?" Val looked up with a bruised expression. "Sometimes I've wondered. You were crazy about me once—when we first met in Paris. Wouldn't let me alone—and I didn't want you to. Has the war scotched my glamour, do you think?"

"Nothing but age will do that for you."

"I grow older."

"I'm still crazy about you, Val—"

"So you stand me up in little coffee houses! That's not my idea of romance." She added after a reflective pause, "Not any girl's."

Ching walked over to the window, looked out, then returned.

"Look, pigeon, how about going home? Back to New York?"

Val looked up curiously. The corners of his mouth were quivering as they usually did when he was up to something. He'd urged her to go home before, often, but not insistently—just as though he considered it good advice.

"I've answered that question before, Ching."

"This one's different. I should have asked, 'How about *us* going home?' "

"Ching! Really?" She was on her feet, pressing slim hands against his shoulders, her eyes suddenly blazing with excitement. "Will you really go back?"

"If God be willing," he replied, smiling down at her. "I told you when you came in that things have been happening. They aren't finished yet. Do sit down."

He walked to the short hall and glanced through into her living-room, returning to sit gingerly on the foot of the chaise longue.

"Are you nervous about something, Ching?" she asked, poking him tentatively with a foot. "More than usual?"

He ignored this. "I've just come onto the greatest news story of my life," he said.

"Me, too."

"You?" He turned his head to stare wonderingly at her.

"Yes. The news that we're going home."

"Be quiet! I've an awful lot to tell you and not all night to do it in. You'll be leaving for Marseilles tomorrow night."

"Marseilles? That's not the way home."

"It will be. Do you remember Erich von Stamm?"

"General von Stamm—the big-big Nazi boss in Paris?"

"Yes—the *Kommandant*. He's Junker, though—not a Nazi. His attaché case has been stolen, and arrived in Vichy yesterday afternoon."

"Don't tell me you have it, Ching?" Val's eyes widened. It was only too likely, she thought, that he did have it, and that it was going to get him into more trouble. Vichy was well supplied with Gestapo, and they didn't like Ching Dillon to start with.

"No. There was only one thing in it of use to me—and I have that. A book. A *tagebuch*."

"What's that—a toggybook?" Val knew practically no German.

"A diary—von Stamm's personal diary."

"Don't tell me you've been snitching people's diaries and reading them! What good is it—and what's it to do with our going home?"

"I've only had time to read a few pages, but those contained some items which will make the Nazis damned unhappy when they're published. I've got to get that book to New York, where I can put it to work."

"Does anyone know you have it?" There was worry in the girl's tone.

"I can't be sure of that. I had a message last night to go to the buvettes across from the Casino and something of possible interest would be placed in my hands."

"Buvettes?"

"Those booths where they used to dish out mineral water which people came here to drink before the war." He broke off to chuckle. "The only stomach trouble anyone in Vichy has nowadays is to get some food in it."

"And that isn't very funny," commented Val, with distaste.

"I carried the stuff to my room to look it over, destroyed the papers—which weren't of any importance—and got all hot about the diary. The dispatch case had been disposed of already. But I'm afraid getting out of Paris with it wasn't a good job. One of the men was caught and afterward much too promptly released for my fancy. There's hardly a chance he wasn't set free in order for him to be followed. The damned fool set right out after his pal, who'd escaped with the case."

"Then you'd better get rid of the book! Right away."

"No. No book, no go home." He reached over and touched the back of her hand with the tip of a finger. "My problem is how to get the book safely to New York. That's where you come in."

"It's not my problem," she resisted. "That's to get you back alive. Taking your ashes back in an urn doesn't appeal to me, somehow."

"The best way, then, is to help me get away with this book," insisted Ching. "Naturally, von Stamm will stop at nothing to get it back. We'll leave here separately, but I'll catch up with you. You go to Marseilles—and take the book with you."

"What will happen to me, if they catch me with the book? My name's Val—not Cavell, you know."

"If they think I have it, they will be watching me. If they don't, there's nothing to worry either of us."

Ching's air of easy confidence irritated Val.

"I can worry anyhow," she retorted.

"Don't. I'll meet you in Marseilles in a few days. I'll travel —less conspicuously—with the help of underground friends. They're in on this. I expect them to provide a boat to take us across the Gulf of the Lion to some Spanish port—possibly even Barcelona, although I'd have to be put ashore somewhere where there's no harbor. I'm not able to cross Spanish frontiers—Franco's butchers have neither forgiven nor forgotten me, you know. Emory is making arrangements for us to be sure of accommodations aboard a ship which is to leave Lisbon November 16. I plan for us to arrive just in time to sail."

Emory was a young fellow in the American legation, always ready to help Ching when he could do so without embarrassment to his position. For Val, he probably wouldn't have let even this interfere.

"Emory could get me a seat on a plane for Lisbon," Val suggested. She didn't like boats—not small ones. "I could wait there for you to catch up."

"No. In Lisbon you'd be a sitting duck for Nazi agents while I was crossing Spain—and if I flew along with you the Falange would grab me at the stop in Madrid."

"Is it according to Hoyle for Emory to be mixed up in a thing like this? Isn't he likely to get into trouble—along with us?"

"There isn't any Hoyle in this war. Anything goes. But he won't be implicated. He knows I can't go to Lisbon in any regular way. All he is supposed to know is that I'm in a stinking hurry to get back home and that you're not staying behind."

Val didn't like it. She was a dancer, not an adventuress, she pointed out. She wasn't up to coping with von Stamm's agents, if it was as bad as Ching thought.

"He has a definite handicap," asserted Ching. "He can't afford the Gestapo getting hold of the diary. He was brutally frank in his disapproval of certain Nazi practices. The *Kom-*

mandant has got himself rather on a spot. Of course, he can't chase after the book himself and I'm wondering just whom he could trust to recover it for him."

Val remembered the dark figure standing across the street when she came in. She told Ching about seeing the man.

"I know—I had been watching him when you showed up," he replied. "He wasn't there when I arrived, and drifted away just as you came in here. Probably just a stray idler. We won't worry about him."

A gust of rain beat against the windows and drummed on the roof. "You never worry about anything." She glanced curiously around the room. "Where is the diary now?"

Ching smiled, then switched his gaze toward a book on her bedside table. It was open and face down, as though someone had been reading in bed. The dust cover was flamboyant, the title *Hearts in Flame*—an excessively gooey romance. Nothing that Valerie Bright would have read since she grew up.

She glanced at him. "That?" her eyes inquired. He nodded.

"I don't like this!" she exclaimed abruptly. "I won't have anything to do with it."

"You wouldn't let me down," he asserted confidently. "Not you."

"It's not letting you down," she denied. "It's just that doing things like this sooner or later will get you killed. Ching, darling, I want you! All in one piece."

He captured both her slim hands, grinning at her devious earnestness, that Broadway trick of veiling sentiment with gay words. "I'll survive—if it's only for you," he said. "But we'll get back to New York, all right. You needn't be afraid of that."

"Well, I am afraid." Her eyes held steadily on Ching's for a few seconds. "If it was so easy, you wouldn't bother to ask me to help. I'm not going to do it!"

He eyed her uncertainly for a moment, then released her hands and got up. His hat was on a chair over near the entrance to the short hall. He retrieved it, then stopped to look back at Val, who'd been following him with her eyes.

"Sorry, Val," he said, with no reproach in his tone. "I had thought you would."

He crossed to the bedside table to pick up the book, which

he thrust under his coat. Val was conscious of the sound of dismally beating rain outside. Ching went back to the hall entrance. "I'll—be seeing you, pigeon," he said, and his lips flicked into a cheerful grin.

"Wait." Val swished around on the chaise longue for an easier view of him. "You might tell me your plans."

"Sure. I'll tell you what they *were*. Tomorrow, you will get a telegram from Marseilles—from Georgette Dupré—"

"She's in Perpignan—not Marseilles," corrected Val. "I had a letter from her last week." Georgette, a fellow dancer, had fled when the Germans approached Paris to her home in the south.

"The wire won't really be from her. It will say that she wants you to join with her in a dancing engagement in Algiers. So, after you got the wire, you were to have sent her one, accepting." He frowned thoughtfully. "Perpignan—that's near the Spanish frontier. In some circumstances she could have been useful."

"She wanted me to come with her when she left Paris," said Val, reflectively. She'd liked the little French girl, but at the time hadn't seen any point in going with her.

"Skip Georgette," resumed Ching restlessly. "Since telegrams now are about as private as billboards, I counted on this one being read. The idea was to fix up a legitimate reason for your going to Marseilles."

"Do you call dancing in Algiers legitimate?" Val asked, crisply. "We don't seem to have the same sources of information, Ching."

"But you weren't going to Algiers."

"I'm not going anywhere." She gazed at him defiantly. "All of a sudden I've discovered that I'm terribly fond of Vichy."

Ching laughed, like a small boy pleased about something, then resumed. "I've asked Emory to arrange for a seat on the train tomorrow night. I'd have left it to your cunning little mind for the best way to bring the diary along."

"My cunning little mind tells me not to do it!" retorted Val. "And I always do what my mind says. Nearly always."

Inwardly, she had begun to hedge. Her opposition to his plans wasn't based on any fear for herself, but on some vague idea of persuading him to abandon the project. She realized

now that there was small chance of this.

"In Marseilles, you were to have gone to the Hotel Dijon, on the Rue Limoges. It's a small hotel just off the Cannebière—But it's no use going into details, since you say you aren't going."

"I'm staying in Vichy—but carry on. Bob Gregory—"

"Never mind Bob—and you can't make me jealous, if that's what you're up to. You were to have stayed at the Dijon until either I showed up or you heard from me."

"Bob asked me tonight what it is that you have and he hasn't—"

"That's your affection, isn't it?"

"So you think!" Val got up and went to the ornate bureau which had stood on three legs for at least twenty years. She pretended to look for something in the welter of toilette articles strewn over its marble top. "Men sometimes are quite too sure of the women they love."

Ching came up behind her and encircled her with strong arms. He lightly kissed the back of her neck, nuzzling the tawny hair aside to reach it.

"Darling—darling—darling— I'm not too sure of you—not as much as I'd like to be," he said. "Circumstances, my job and all, have made me a poor stick of a lover, Val, not intention. I quite realize there have been times when you had plenty to complain about. Which, incidentally, you did. But don't get the notion I don't love you because of that."

"How's a girl to tell when she's loved, if not by the way a man acts?"

"Don't you feel anything?"

"Neglected."

"Oh, Val—I'm sorry!" He kissed a stray little curl. "Val, my pigeon, I'm all bound up in a terrific job—and there's more behind it than I can tell you about until we're clear of Europe—"

"Pigeon!" exclaimed Val, not greatly mollified. "Now it's a carrier pigeon you want me to be."

Ching laughed. She could feel it vibrate in his big chest, pressing against her shoulders.

"That's clever. But let's not be clever, now. Say you'll stick with me in this business. We should be in Lisbon within a week, and once aboard the lugger, you know."

Val sighed. "I don't want to go to Marseilles," she demurred. "Not with that diary."

"You want to get back to New York with me, don't you?" Ching pointed out. "And I'm practically on my way."

"Yes—with *you*. Not a memory of you." She sighed again. "Perhaps I shouldn't be so dumb. You won't ever care for me more than anything else."

"But I do!"

"You don't. If you did, you would think more about me, and getting ourselves back to New York than just a—*just a damned book!*" It was a cancerous thought that constantly grew in Valerie Bright's mind—she never came first.

Ching was thoughtful for a moment or two. "Baby, these aren't days when decent-minded people give their own little affairs priority," he said.

"For baby, there never has been and won't be any other kind of days," she said firmly. "I came into a world I didn't make —and from then on it's just been a big try to make things endurable for me."

Ching nodded somberly. "I know. You don't give a damn about the rest of the world, as long as you aren't too upset by what it does."

"That isn't true, Ching!" Val objected. "It can't do any good for me to weep over what the Nazis do to people. But I hate these things. Hurting others because you are strong is stupid. All cruelty is that! It could be a swell world, if we who live in it would just be kind to each other."

"You're a little pacifist—that's what you are!"

"Of course. Can you name me anything better than peace?"

"We can't live in peace with a lot of thieves."

Val studied Ching's reflected face in the not very good mirror before her. His eyes were serious now.

"So you steal von Stamm's diary! You want to take it to America and have it published. Also, you want me to help." She inhaled sharply. "I shan't do it!"

"We are forced at times to fight with the weapons our enemies supply." Ching released his hold around her slender waist, taking a step backward. "I'll fight these bastards—with anything that comes to hand!"

"Even using me!"

"Even you." He stroked his chin with the tips of his fingers. "But I guess I can't count on any help from you."

"I keep telling you not to be so sure of things." Val's breathing was becoming difficult as emotion swept through. "Especially of me."

"You'll go to Marseilles?"

Val swung around, leaning back against the rickety bureau and looking up at him, doubt still pushing at her throat.

"Ching—remember what they tried to do to you in Spain?" she exclaimed. "I've heard of such terrible things that happen to people who do things like this—"

"I'll get by. The last the Francos saw of me I hadn't any hair, you know." Again his arms encircled her and he kissed her lips, but she could see in his eyes that his thoughts were racing on to something else before his lips left hers.

She went with him to the entrance door to her apartment, then, after locking the door, came back into the bedroom to stand by the window until she heard his cheerful whistle as Papa Bec let him out.

The diary, she noticed, was back on the bedside table. Val shivered as she saw it. For the first time in her young life she felt herself in personal and impending danger. She left the window and automatically peeled off her dress.

She hadn't really agreed to meet Ching in Marseilles, but thought she might just as well begin packing. This wouldn't take much doing, as she had become used to living out of her trunk.

Then she heard the tinkle of the concierge's bell and presently feet ascending the wooden stairs to the gallery. Val paused, listening, thinking the newcomer was very likely someone calling on Madame Legrot, who had the only other apartment on this gallery. Or it might even be Ching returning for something he'd forgotten. Madame frequently had visitors at night. Val had ideas about her neighbor, but not exact knowledge. The callers were always men.

The footsteps stopped at Val's door, however, and then came the sound of someone rapping on the ancient panel. She caught up a negligée, thrusting her arms into it and staring fixedly at

the little hall. The sound came again—a little more vigorously.

The negligée flowing behind her, she walked into the living-room, which was dark, and opened the door the merest crack.

"What is it?" she demanded, peering out at an obscure figure outside.

"Mademoiselle Bright?" The intonation was not that of a Frenchman.

"Yes. What do you want?"

Now she could see that it was a man, well swathed in a glistening black raincoat, the collar turned up around the lower part of his face, and his hat pulled down over his eyes so that to Val his face was merely a light spot in the darkness.

"I am looking for Monsieur Charles Dillon." He seemed trying to peer into the gloom of the room behind Val.

"Why do you inquire here? I have not seen Monsieur Dillon —for several days," returned Val, conscious of a chill sensation creeping upward along her spine.

"I ask your pardon, then. I had reason to think he might come here tonight." The man made a slight gesture with his right hand and Val noticed that the tip of his index finger was missing. "It is of importance that I see Monsieur Dillon before morning, or I should not have disturbed you."

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you. Try his hotel!"

"I have already done that."

"Then the bars around Vieux-Parc. He's not here."

Val closed the door determinedly and locked it. She stood there waiting for the sound of retreating footsteps, her nerves crawling. Presently she heard him clumping down the wooden staircase and returned to her bedoom, struggling to regain control of her rebel body.

The stranger's toneless articulation, his rasping syllables, left no question in her mind of his nationality and his visit at this late hour was equally convincing that the Nazis had some idea of Ching's fresh activity.

She had to abandon her first impulse to dress and go out searching for Ching in order to give him warning. He had not mentioned where he was going, but she felt sure it wouldn't be any of his customary idling places. Ching Dillon, engaged in underground concerns, would be very difficult to find.

Chapter Four: AN UNWELCOME SNOOPER

WHEN VAL AWOKE the next morning sunshine was streaming in through the two narrow windows of her bedchamber. That was nice. There hadn't been much fine weather in Vichy of late. She turned onto her back and wished some of the sunshine could reach her. It would be lovely to feel its warmth on her uncovered body, but the canopied bed wasn't close enough to the windows for that. After taking the apartment she had attempted to move it, only to discover that Eighteenth-century beds weren't mobile.

She yawned and stretched her arms, then twisted her head sideways to see what time it was by a small clock on the bedside table—and saw the book. *Hearts in Flame.* She shivered as the events of the night came flooding into her consciousness with flaring anxiety about Ching's safety.

Speculating on what she had better do to warn Ching about the man who'd come to her apartment looking for him, she explored the breakfast possibilities in the cubbyhole kitchenette off the hall. There wasn't much there, and at the moment she would have traded the tin of tea she found for just one good cup of coffee. She was fortunate, though, to have the tea. Most people in Vichy hadn't even that.

She thought of Bob Gregory. Instead of living in a hotel, as most of the other correspondents did, he had rooms in a large pension in a little street over beyond the Parc Hôpital. Bob might be able to locate Ching and tell him that she had an urgent message for him. When she'd finished breakfast—and, with what there was to eat, this wouldn't take long!—she would dress and walk over to Bob's quarters.

Even in the bright sunshine her walk wasn't very satisfactory. There were children in the small park, and their little pinched faces distressed her. She realized that few of Vichy's inhabitants were properly fed, but seeing these scrawny, dull-eyed children listlessly trying to play always got her down. It wasn't *their* war. Once she had received in a packet of food from home a small box of chocolates which she had taken to the park and distributed among the kids. But the gesture had left her more

depressed than before. Most of the smaller children didn't even know what candy was!

Bob Gregory had gone out early, and naturally without saying where he was bound, the concierge told her. Val hurried back to her own pension, hoping there might be a message from Ching when she got there. There wasn't, but Papa Bec had a telegram for her. The wire signed *Georgette Dupré.*

By this time Val had decided to go to Marseilles. She'd known she would all along, but had stubbornly resisted admitting it. At least by doing so she would keep the dangerous diary out of Ching's hands, in case the Gestapo or something caught up with him. She would take it to Marseilles, but after that she'd take no further part in the adventure. She even considered destroying the book, but decided this was a bit too drastic. Ching would never forgive her. Nevertheless, he would have to make other arrangements for transporting it to Lisbon. She wouldn't be that sort of pigeon. Not even for Ching.

Back in her rooms, she put on a pair of shorts and a halter, having discovered this to be an ideal costume for packing, and then went at it. Most of her clothes were already in the trunk, it being more accessible than the single small and dank closet of the apartment, but there was a mass of trivial objects scattered about and also the things in the marble-topped bureau.

The faint tinkle of the concierge's bell down below came floating up, then footsteps on the stairs to the gallery. That meant she was to have a visitor, unless it was someone for Madame Legrot. Val didn't think the caller was for Madame, however, as these usually came at night. Moreover, the noise on the stairs was being made by high heels.

Nevertheless, Val waited until someone began rapping on the door before she left the bedroom to see who it was. By this time a feminine voice was calling, "Val, oh Val! Are you there?"

Lotus Nedry, of course. The woman had a most annoying habit of showing up when you least wanted to see her. Of course, if she had waited until invited, she wouldn't ever come. Val disliked Lotus. There was something sneaky about her—like some of those shrewd little chorus girls back home who hang around principals in the hope of catching a discarded but still serviceable man.

"Oh, darling!" effused Lotus, pushing in. The greeting was standard. "I've been wanting to see you."

"Why?" Val retreated to the couch and sat down, blandly staring at her visitor.

"Well—" Lotus hesitated, then sat on the arm of a chair, hitching up her skirt. Val speculated about the silk stockings Lotus always seemed to be well supplied with. "I've just wanted to. I need some sort of story to send home, and things are pretty dull now."

"But I don't know anything," objected Val. "I never do. I don't go around listening to political gossip."

"Of course you don't. You wouldn't know what it was all about if you did." Lotus laughed, ripplingly, and swung a foot. She'd have been more comfortable if she sat down properly, Val thought. "But when you need a story, you can't be too particular what it's about. Or whom."

"Or thanks," supplemented Val.

"You've been rehearsing?" asked Lotus, eyeing Val's abbreviated costume with interest.

"No—packing." Val considered a moment before going on. "I'm off to Algiers, I think. A possible dancing engagement has come along."

"That's a story. By the way, I heard this morning that Darlan is in Algiers. Wouldn't be any connection, would there?"

"Not any. I don't go for admirals and I've not met Darlan."

Lotus laughed again. "Admirals are all right—even small ones."

"I'll leave 'em for you. What's he doing in Algiers?" The dancer's tone was completely indifferent. The movements of political figures didn't interest her at all.

"To see his family, he says. Personally, I doubt that is the real reason."

"You'd doubt the real reason, too, Lotus, if you knew what it was. But what's this gag about a story you've cooked up?" Val wanted to get finished with her visitor.

"Oh, I just thought the story of an American dancer hanging around Vichy might make good copy," answered Lotus, slipping off the arm of the chair into its slightly more comfortable seat. "If I could tell what she was hanging around for."

"You can't."

"I could. But I shouldn't like to say that you were here because Ching Dillon was, even if it's common knowledge. Now, this Algerian business—"

"Oh, skip it, Lotus." It wasn't a story and Val knew it. Not the kind Lotus Nedry dealt in. "It's nice of you to stop by, and all, but what the hell have you got on your mind? Did your little playmate Jurg Sampson send you for something?"

"Jurg isn't my little playmate, Val, and has nothing to do with my being here." Lotus leaned forward, trying to fix Val with a purposeful and knowing stare. "As I told you, I'm looking for a story."

"And now you have one from the horse's mouth," retorted Val. "'Valerie Bright, American dancer, leaves Vichy for Algiers.' Is that worth the cable toll? Nuts!"

"It's a paragraph. Perhaps more."

"Oh, all right—make whatever you like of it. Sorry, Chi-Chi, but I've got a bit of packing to do." Val got up, happy at having achieved an insult. Lotus didn't like being called Chi-Chi.

Lotus declined the insult. She followed Val into the bedchamber. "I'll stick around. It's fun to watch people pack. One gets an insight on what people are like by watching them pack their things."

"I'll bet you were the kind of little girl that sat on her front porch to watch people moving into the house next door. We used to call it being nosy."

Val went on with her packing, conscious of Lotus's scrutiny of everything that went into the trunk. She didn't think the newspaper woman ordinarily would waste her time watching such a proceeding. Lotus Nedry had something on her mind, something that she was going to some effort to envelop in a wordy mist.

The woman poked around, examing with obvious disinterest the bottles and cosmetic stuff on the bureau in order to steal a look into the open drawers from which Val was taking things. Val didn't mind this particularly, although she regarded it as unwarranted snooping, but when Lotus began a circuitous journey toward the book on the bedside table the dancer was across the room in two graceful leaps. She wasn't quick enough.

Lotus picked up *Hearts in Flame,* but before she could open it Val reached for it. "Give me that!" she exclaimed. She didn't wait for the demand to be complied with, but snatched the loud-jacketed volume from Lotus's hands.

"Well!" Lotus stepped back and looked at Val as though completely astounded.

She didn't fool Val, though. The dancer saw something in the woman's eyes that betrayed a certain satisfaction. "Sorry," Val said stiffly. "If there's anything I loathe, it's anyone poking through my things like you're doing."

"It was just a book," protested Lotus. Then her eyebrows lifted. "I was curious about a cheap novel having rounded corners—that's all. Since the jacket doesn't fit any too well, I suppose it's camouflage for something dirty inside."

Val tucked the book into a trunk drawer and turned to face the other woman. The situation was getting out of hand, she thought. There was no plausible reason for indignation had the book been what it appeared to be, and this baffling fact strained at her nerves. She craved the satisfaction of slapping the smug look from Lotus Nedry's face. Possibly gathering the idea from Val's expression, the newswoman decided to move on to safer ground. "Is Ching going to Algiers, too?" she inquired.

"Certainly not," Val replied. "What would Ching Dillon do in Algiers? There's nothing going on there, is there?"

"Nothing we know about," admitted Lotus. "But—"

Someone else was rapping on the gallery door. Val hadn't heard the concierge's bell. She dropped a pile of lingerie into a drawer of the trunk and went to see who the newcomer was. It might be Ching, she thought. It was Emory Stephens, from the legation. "Hi, Val, I've come up with—"

Val stopped him with a finger on her lips and a glance toward her bedroom. He grinned understandingly, then whispered quickly, "I've seen Ching."

"Tell him I must see him, as quickly as possible," returned Val, the words scarcely audible.

He nodded and came in, glancing around the room curiously. Emory was a nice-looking youngster, not much older than Val, and designed by nature to be exceedingly attractive to almost any girl. The interest he displayed in her, Val believed, was only

restrained by his friendship for Ching. He sat down on the couch and eyed her tentatively. Val moved to a position near the short hallway to keep an eye on what her other guest was doing in the bedroom.

"Nedry is here," Val said. She glanced again into the bedroom. The newspaper woman was headed toward the hallway now, evidently coming to see who the new caller was. Emory took a long envelope from his pocket and tucked it under the couch cushion he was sitting on. "I'm going away for a couple of weeks, Emory. To Algiers with Georgette Dupré to dance."

Emory knew all about this, but Lotus wasn't supposed to know he did. She sauntered into the room. "Hello, Emory. Fancy seeing you here."

"I was about to make the same bright observation," retorted Emory, but getting up.

"I suppose business brings you here," replied Lotus, taking the same chair and pose she'd assumed when she had first arrived in the apartment. "That's my reason, too."

"I must put in a receptionist," observed Val. "And have an outer office. Also hours—"

"I take it you've brought Val her passport. You knew of course, she's off to Algiers," interrupted Lotus.

"I seem to have a secretary already," continued Val. "Whether I want one or not."

"What would I be doing with Val's passport?" demanded Emory, uneasily.

He was ignored. Lotus smiled crisply at Val.

"You think I'm prying into your affairs, don't you?"

"Well, aren't you?" returned Val bluntly.

"Yes, of course. I'm a newspaper woman."

Val nodded, eyeing Lotus somberly. "I've heard you were a newspaper something-else."

Emory's laugh was explosive. "Now, how about you girls not fighting until I've left?"

"Take her with you," suggested Val. "I'm in a lousy humor, anyway. I want to fight someone. It was a newspaper woman that caused me to leave New York. She said I was thirty-six."

"For that you had to leave New York?" chuckled Emory.

"Oh, no-o—not just for that. I stabbed her. I stabbed and

stabbed and stabbed her!"

"Naturally, that quite finished *her* off." Emory nodded gravely.

"It did not. I dulled three of my best daggers on her without penetrating her hide." Val glanced venomously at Lotus, then started for the bedroom. "I wish you'd get out—both of you. I've packing to do. Can you get me on a train for Marseilles tonight, Emory?"

Emory grinned at her efforts to impress Lotus that her departure was all news to him. "You'll be fixed up for one scheduled to leave at ten tonight. That means it will leave at some time after ten—probably about midnight—the ways trains are being run these days. Will that do?"

"Fine."

He looked at Lotus, who was staring coolly at Val in the hall entrance. "What do you say we scram, Nedry? Seems as if we're in the way here."

Lotus considered, then said, "Okay."

Emory got up. "How would it be, Val, if I threw a small party for you at André's—a farewell party? Say at eight."

"Oh, swell!" Val's eyes showed pleasure. "Thanks, Emory."

"All the boys," he said.

"And me," supplemented Lotus.

"Try and keep you out," commented Val. "Well, all right, Emory. Let her come, too. A farewell party with Chi-Chi has points, if it comes out that way. If you see Ching anywhere around—"

"He'll be there," Lotus put in confidently.

"I'm not so sure he's in town," said Val slowly. "I—I haven't seen him in two or three days."

"Says you," observed Lotus. "Or don't you include nights?"

Emory and Lotus went on out, the latter shooting a triumphant grin at the dancer. Val stood a moment, then took the envelope containing her transportation and other papers essential to wartime travel from under the cushion. Back in her bedroom, she opened the trunk drawer to reassure herself that the diary was still there. It was, but it was also obvious that Nedry had seized the opportunity to satisfy her curiosity while Val was admitting Emory. And that wasn't good, Val reflected.

The day wore on and she completed her preparations for flight. Each time she heard the bell down at the gate she paused to listen for approaching footsteps that might be Ching. She knew he would run up the stairs as he always did. But he didn't come, and her nervous apprehension grew, attended by gloomy foreboding.

At four Bob Gregory came with a message, which although lessening her present apprehension did nothing to alleviate her dread of future events. Ching had reached Bob by telephone, asking him to see Val and tell her he'd heard about the farewell party and would be on hand.

"But he wants us to pretend he's been away from town and doesn't know about your leaving, or the party, either. He'll just happen into André's. He wants to give the impression that he hasn't seen you for several days. Just why, he didn't explain."

"I know why."

"Ching seemed to think you would." Bob sat down gingerly on a fragile gilt chair that hadn't been designed for six-foot men to sit on. "See here, Val, I'm hoping he isn't getting involved in a mess of underground activities. I'm not asking if he is, mind you, but I know Ching's enthusiasm. I have the greatest admiration for those pals of his that know no surrender to the Nazis. It doesn't hurt them as much to die resisting as it would to live in pitiful slavery. It's one thing or the other as they see it. But it isn't your dish."

"You're telling me." Val ran her fingers through her tawny hair, then shook it out. "I'm all scaredy-cat when it comes to that sort of stuff."

Chapter Five: FAREWELL PARTY

THE PARTY AT THE ROUND TABLE in André's cellar was gay enough. Quite a number of the boys had shown up and some had brought girl friends with them. Val knew only one of these, Doll Marvin, and of course the ubiquitous Lotus Nedry. Doll Marvin, little sister of a WCX commentator who was at the moment in Berne, compensated for her lack of stature with feverish interest in everything that was going on, particularly in the masculine division.

Achmed was there with his banjo. It is quite probable that Arabs don't play banjos, but Achmed was no more Arab than Joe Louis. An American Negro, he had escaped from the occupied zone by insistence that he'd never been closer to the United States than Cairo. The Cairo he meant was in Illinois, but he hadn't mentioned that. He spoke French without an accent—that is, without a French accent—but as his inquisitors themselves weren't too good with native French, he got by. Now he was hanging around Vichy in the hope of finding some way to get back to Chicago, which city he promised his confidants he'd never be pried loose from if he ever reached it.

The party was well under way, with lots of champagne, which was easy to get while other wines, for some reason, were scarce, before Ching came sauntering down the steps wearing a look of surprise as he saw the gathering at the table.

"What gives?" he asked, stopping back of Val's chair.

Bob Gregory, sitting next to her, replied. "Val's leaving for Algiers," he said, loud enough for anyone to hear. Two men at a table out of the range of Val's vision, moved their heads as though to listen.

"Without consulting me?" demanded Ching. "A fine business! Requiring full explanation. Get up, Spencer, and give me your seat."

Spencer got up with some reluctance and moved around the table to a vacant chair next to Doll Marvin. Ching eased himself into the seat just vacated, slipped his hand across Val's lap to squeeze hers.

"I've been worrying," Val said. "There was a German who came looking for you last night right after you left."

"What did he look like?" Ching's eyes showed only mild interest, but Val knew better.

"He had on a black rubber slicker and his hat was pulled down over his eyes. I don't know what he looked like." Val thought for a moment, visualizing the figure she'd stared at in the dark entrance to her apartment. "Oh, yes—I saw his hand. There wasn't any tip on his first finger."

"Which hand?"

"His right hand." Val was sure of this. "He must have known you had been there, Ching."

"I don't place him. Of course, a missing finger tip isn't much to go on. And he didn't necessarily know I'd been there. Lots of people in Vichy would know I often visit your apartment. For that matter, he might have been one of my underground friends—they're not all French, by any means."

Achmed played his banjo. Then someone shouted, "Hand dance," and the others took it up. This was something Val had invented long ago to substitute for dancing in little Parisian cafés where no space was provided for it.

Val demurred at first. Her gaiety so far had been entirely synthetic. "Dancing in Vichy? Oh, no! You don't dance at a wake."

"It's not our funeral," squawked one of the men. "Besides, if you don't, Spence'll recite his new poem. It's somethin' awful."

Ching lifted her hand to the table top. "Be a good girl and do your stuff!" he urged. "This is a party, you know. Your party"

Bob Gregory brought her other hand up and deposited it alongside its mate. Emory, who was usually a quiet person in a gathering like this, added his voice to the demand. Val looked at her slender hands, resting palms down on the bare wood of the round table. The others were looking at her eagerly, and bringing their own hands into like position.

"All right," she said. "We'll hand dance, then."

"Play something fast, Achmed!" shouted someone. "Come over close!"

The Negro shuffled over to the table, staring with a bewildered expression at the hands spread on the table. "Whut you-all afixin' to do?" he asked. "Does that table start walkin' Ah goes home! The fas' way."

"It's hand dance!" called Abe Steiner. "Play a foxtrot, or something, Ach-y."

With the mental note that the white race was getting screwier and screwier, the Negro hit up a fast number, meantime keeping a cautious eye on the spread-out hands. Val's hands moved first, began slapping their palms down on the table top with the beat. A dozen pairs of hands began doing the same in unison, the owners watching Val's.

Slap-slap-slap! Then she lifted her hands, crossed them to touch each to her neighbors' on either side who were following her gestures closely, as were all the others. Back on the table top—slap-slap-slap! Now she clapped her hands together, with a pert little nod to Bob Gregory on her right. Then three more claps and a nod to Ching.

"Ah declare!" exclaimed Achmed, putting on more power and stepping up the tempo.

There were seemingly endless gestures in the routine of Val's hand dance, some of them invented on the spur of the moment, but most were well known to the others. They duplicated each move, with the three slaps on the table top between, until Achmed reached the end of the number he was playing and was too amazed to start another. It was noisy, but fun.

"More, Achmed!" shouted a voice. The Negro grinned amiably. "Does Ah ever git me back to Chicago, I sho' has got one mo' tale to tell!" he explained. "Gonna git them there South Side so'efoots to dancin' on they hands."

Val's gay invention was infectious and before they were through had spread to some of the other tables. Then, abruptly, the dancer's gaiety faded. She'd happened to glance over her shoulder and caught sight of the two men seated at a table in back of her. One was stocky, blond, with Prussian blue eyes, and complacently German. Even while sitting, he had military bearing. His companion, somewhat younger and slighter, gave the same impression.

Then she was glad she had taken the precaution she had with Ching's book. Lotus Nedry had demonstrated the folly of leaving it lying carelessly around, as Ching had suggested, so Val had brought it with her and had kept it in her lap all during this party.

Her trunk had been taken to the station during the late afternoon, but her bags were still in the apartment. If they were now being searched during her absence, it wouldn't matter. She turned to Ching. "I think we'd better go to my apartment for my bags, darling. It's after nine. Will you get my coat?"

"Right. Of course, there's hardly a chance the train will come in before midnight, but it might if you aren't there." He went to get her coat, hanging with others on a seldom-used rack

across the room.

"We'll continue the party at the station," suggested Emory from across the table. "André, have the waiter bring me the check for all of this."

"*Oui,* m'sieu." The proprietor had been hovering around watching the hand dance with great interest. He nodded to Emory, but his eyes were on Val. "A good journey, mam'selle. We shall regret your absence."

"Thank you, André." Val glanced back at the Germans, whose table was within hearing distance now that the others had quieted down. She lifted her voice a little. "*Au revoir.* Tell all the boys on the Rue de la Paix the Yanks will soon be there—"

The older German heard her all right. He scowled. Val was delighted, but a little astonished to discover that she was really working up an intense dislike for Germans in general. André looked worried. She patted his arms lightly and spoke more softly. "It's true, André—we're coming over—and perhaps I'll be back to see if those kids in Nouveau Parc have the nice round faces they should have."

Ching came back with her coat. Most of the others had got up from the table, but she was still sitting and remained so until she had the coat on—an awkward business and she could see that Ching was puzzled.

She led the procession to the stairway, feeling a little choked up, but all the rest of her party seemed lively enough. That is, they were gay enough until they reached the sidewalk, but the darkened street and somber feeling that hung over Vichy brought quiet to their voices as they tramped past the Casino and beyond to the Rue Brisson. The whole gang of them waited at the pension gate while Ching, Emory, and Bob Gregory went up with her to fetch her one bag and hatbox. Then the party strung along behind as they headed for the Avenue la Gare on the way to the station.

"Ching, I'm frightened," Val exclaimed softly, as she walked along at his side. "I was afraid my bag and hatbox would be searched while we were at André's."

"Were they?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, if they had been, we'd at least be certain where we stand. As it is, we don't know for sure how much they suspect. I don't *know* that they have any idea I have the diary, or that, if they do, you might be in on the job." He was silent for a few steps. "I take it you didn't have the book in your bags?" Val felt his keen eyes on her.

"Oh, no!"

"Where is it? Not in your trunk, I hope. That would be searched, too, if—"

"Remember I asked you to get my coat before I got up when we were leaving André's?"

"Yes, of course."

"All the time we were sitting at the table I had the damned book in my lap. Then I was afraid that German sitting back of us might see it when I got up, so I asked you to bring my coat to hide it under. It's there now." She hugged her elbow against her side, with the volume between. "I'm telling you, brother, I haven't been this scared before, ever. You'll come to Marseilles as quickly as you can, Ching?"

"Just that soon. Don't worry, pigeon—"

"Frightened pigeon!" she interrupted. "Listen—I wouldn't know a carrier pigeon from a wild duck, but I'll not forget being one."

"Remember it's the Hotel Dijon you go to, Rue Limoges. You'll be protected there—and I don't want to have to hunt all over Marseilles for you."

"Who is going to do all this protecting?"

"My friends of the underground. You'll be watched over—night and day."

"I'm just as scared of them as I am of anyone," objected Val. *Night and Day*. Their favorite melody. She had an irrelevant mental image of the exquisite Claire Luce and agile Fred Astaire dancing in *Gay Divorce*. Those had been better days!

"A young fellow named Luis will make contact with you. Trust him in anything he suggests."

"Luis who?"

"You needn't bother about his last name—he gets new ones from time to time. Just remember Luis—and that he's Spanish."

"What's he for?" demanded Val, staring ahead through the

dark street.

"To keep you out of trouble."

"A new kind of Spaniard. The ones I've known all had other ideas."

"This one's different. Just a kid, really."

"Really?" echoed Val absently. She was looking hopefully at an even darker spot just ahead where a flight of stairs came down to the walk from a grille-enclosed gallery. As they reached it she stopped and put a foot on the bottom step. "Ching, tie my shoestring?"

Ching was quite aware that Val wore pumps. Men in general would know what she had on her feet even if unable to describe the rest of her costume. He looked around at their escort, now catching up. They were marching in imitation goosestep and thinking it very funny.

"The rest of you go on," Ching called. "We'll be along in a minute."

Lotus Nedry laughed. "That'll be fast going, Ching. A minute! If I were in love with someone, I'd need more than a minute even to get started."

"I doubt that, Nedry," returned Ching. "I've seen you work."

The party kept on, some of them glancing back in open curiosity and all of them making quite a bit of noise. Val stared after them in silence for a moment. "She's the snoopingest woman I ever saw!" she exclaimed abruptly.

"Nedry?"

"Yes. She came up to my apartment this afternoon, to do her daily snoop, I guess. I'm pretty sure she managed to get a look into your book, but hardly enough to do her much good. Does she read German?"

"I suppose so." Ching frowned. "She's quite too interested in things which don't concern her."

"She believes everything concerns her. Do you think she has any idea about this business?"

"I wouldn't think so. Still—" He paused, sliding his arm under Val's and on around her slender waist. "She doesn't care with whom she goes. I've seen her in the hotel bars with men that looked to be either Gestapo or stooges for Laval. Her pal Sampson, also. There's a real wart for you."

"Not for me. Don't keep me waiting in Marseilles, Ching!"

"Nor here!" He put his other arm around her and pulled her tightly against him. Val didn't resist—just stood there in his close embrace, but with her head down.

"Val, I do love you," he said. "Far more than you can have any idea."

"What have you done to give a girl ideas?" she complained. "Except treat her like a second cousin."

"But—you do love me, don't you?"

"Yes, damn it." Val sighed.

He held her a little tighter, as though reassured. She felt him tremble against her and looked up.

"Once this is over, I'll prove to you how much I mean it when I say I love you. And there'll be no fooling."

"We'd better go on," Val said vaguely.

"But there's no hurry. The train won't arrive for a while. This is something that needs doing, pigeon."

Before they went on to the station Val forgot her fears and uncertainty about Ching's intentions. She also forgot about the train, but that didn't matter. They rejoined the waiting group in the station long before it arrived.

"Fix your lips, darling," greeted Lotus.

"Try keeping yours closed, my pet!" retorted Val.

"While kissing?" Lotus laughed triumphantly.

An hour later Val was en route to Marseilles. She wasn't alone in the compartment, as she would have preferred. She realized, however, that in these times one was lucky even to get a seat. A slender, young-looking woman in cheap black, with a shawl pulled over her hair and shoulders, had taken the seat next the window, several badly tied parcels and a decrepit bag piled about her feet.

Val had seen her boarding the train while the final leave-taking was going on. The woman glanced up at her with soft, luminous eyes as the dancer entered the compartment and inadvertently kicked one of the parcels.

"Pardonnez-moi, madame," apologized Val.

The woman's expression didn't change, but she waved a finger in a circular fashion in front of her lips as though to indicate that she was a mute, shaking her head slightly. Val sat

down next to her, as she disliked riding backward, then unfolded a rug she had brought along and spread it over her lap. Trains weren't being heated and the night might turn chilly. That wasn't her entire reason, though. She wanted something under which to conceal Ching's precious diary. Glancing at the woman and seeing that her eyes had closed as though settling to sleep, Val brought the book from her coat and slipped it down into her lap.

The door to the compartment opened once more to admit another passenger. All Val's fears returned with a sickening impact. The newcomer was the German she had seen just a little while ago in André's cellar café.

Chapter Six: FUTILE JOURNEY

THE GERMAN eyed Val with bland curiosity as he sat down on the seat opposite. Val noted uneasily that he hadn't brought any baggage with him, but just as the train started another man hurried aboard, lugging a heavy portmanteau. This one started speaking in German, but the other stopped him with a scowl and a gesture. The new passenger subsided and sat down. Then *he* began staring with frank interest at Val. It made her restless. She tried closing her eyes, but it didn't help. She could still feel both pairs of cold eyes staring at her and her own popped open involuntarily. "What's wrong with me?" she snapped.

"Pardon?" returned the German, excessively polite.

"I asked if there was something wrong with me," she repeated. "You sit there staring at me as though there were."

He shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "What else can one do?" he asked. "Sitting opposite, as this. Besides, you are pleasing to look at."

Wants to flirt, does he, thought the dancer. "It doesn't please me, though."

"Besides"—he ignored her complaint—"I have seen you before."

"Tonight at André's, of course."

"Before that. In Paris." He was working awfully hard at looking friendly, she thought. "At the Casino de Paris you danced."

"Nice of you to remember," answered Val. "That was a

long time ago."

"Not long enough to forget you." He smiled knowingly. "Also, I have seen you in Munich—when you came to dance for the Fuehrer."

"Not for your Fuehrer—for a lot of money. On the barrelhead."

"You are a practical young woman." There was a thoughtful gleam in the German's eyes. "It is well, in these days, eh?"

"Or any other time," amplified Val. "If she's on her own—with no one to look out for her."

He nodded. "Now you are returning to your own country?" he asked, and added cynically, "To dance."

"No. To Algiers." She hesitated, then mimicked his tone. "To dance."

His companion, Val noticed, never ceased staring at her, but from his expression she thought he wasn't able to follow a conversation in English. The man she was talking with, though, wasn't showing any difficulty with the language. She wondered where he had learned it.

"Where will you dance—in Algiers?" he asked. It was almost a demand.

"I don't know. It is being arranged by a friend in Marseilles who is also a dancer."

"Algiers cannot be recommended for a young girl."

"Name a place this side of the Atlantic that can be," retorted Val. "Even for a young girl who also happens to be German. You Nazis have spoiled everything—for yourselves as well!"

His eyes glowed with sulky offense. "We Nazis are not to blame. It is your capitalistic Jews who have made this situation—your war-mongering Churchills and Rosenvelts!"

"I hadn't noticed," replied Val blandly. Somehow she wasn't frightened now. She never was, when it came to a verbal tilt between herself and some man. There'd been a lot of such tilts in her young life, and not always confined to words. "Wasn't it Germany that started the business of giving up butter for guns?"

He smiled tolerantly. "Because we Germans are of more intelligence than others. We knew this was coming."

Val made a sound she'd learned after leaving Terre Haute. "You knew it was coming because you were planning it," she

declared firmly. "A man doesn't sacrifice his grocery money to buy a gun unless he intends doing something with it. And when no one else had a gun, isn't it obvious who started the shooting?"

"We were betrayed at Versailles."

"I don't know anything about Versailles." Val didn't. She was no student of history that didn't include Isadora Duncan, Pavlowa, or Bill Robinson. "I've been told that when the going got tough your Kaiser ran away to Holland, your generals quit, and your folks back home decided that guns weren't as digestible as they'd been led to believe."

Her little speech wasn't digestible to the German, either. He decided to break off the bootless argument. He managed a smile, which unfortunately expressed masculine condescension. "Let us consider that the war will not be settled in *this* railway carriage," he said loftily.

"No, it won't," Val agreed, resentment stirring at his smug expression. "Why aren't you in your army, instead of civilian clothes and a carriage to Marseilles? I hadn't heard there were any battles going on there."

"It is possible that I am in the army," he snapped, nettled. "Also that my presence here is of some value to my Fuehrer."

"Gestapo?" queried Val. "Sent out to see why an American dancer would be going to Algiers? Could be she was going there to dance, you know."

"I am not Gestapo!" denied the German with a snort. He leaned forward, trying to fix her with a masterful eye, but Val was engaged in pulling the rug closer around her. It was either getting chilly, or people really did get cold from rising fright.

"If you were, you wouldn't admit it," she replied, with cautious interest. "Anyhow, it doesn't matter to me what you are —or who, either." She settled into the seat a little more firmly, as though wearying of the conversation, staring sleepily at the rug spread over her lap.

"It matters to me that you know who and what I am," he insisted. "I am Colonel Kurt von Stamm."

The words struck out like a whip, but nothing in Val's attitude suggested her quick alarm. Under the rug her hands gripped the book until her fingers hurt from the pressure.

"Colonel, eh?" she murmured. "Retired, I suppose?"

"Certainly not! In Germany we do not retire from active service at my age."

Val raised her eyes and managed a cynical smile. "But isn't service in France about the same thing? I mean it's on the safe side. Not dangerous, or uncomfortable, as in Russia."

The colonel didn't like the insinuation and showed it in his eyes. "You are determined to be insulting," he said. "Why? It is true, of course, that our countries are at war, but could we not for the moment declare a personal truce?"

"What for?"

He shrugged his thick shoulders. "Nothing is to be gained by quarreling. It is mere chance that we find ourselves traveling together."

Val didn't think it was mere chance. She recalled that Ching had wondered whom General von Stamm might commission to recover his lost diary. Well, that question might now have an answer.

"Are you the von Stamm who is *Kommandant* in Paris?" she asked, brightly. This was old technique to any girl with a Broadway background. Let 'em believe you think they're big and they become less wary, more fruitful quarry. She wondered vaguely why she was using it now and decided that it was to fortify his obvious opinion that she was a fluff-brained doll. Conscious of the book she was gripping in her lap, she wondered further if he mightn't be quite right.

He laughed harshly. "That is a station above mere colonels. You speak of my father, General Erich von Stamm."

"I thought the name was familiar." She flashed a glance at his silent companion. "Doesn't your friend speak English, or is he just the German variety of droop?"

"Droop? An Americanism, I suppose." He eyed his companion as if looking for a clue. "But he doesn't speak English."

"You speak it very well." This, Val thought, was a good place to get off the subject of von Stamms.

"I spent five years in Washington as a military attaché," he explained.

So this was von Stamm's son! Naturally, he'd be the very one his father would entrust on a mission of this sort. Ching had

told her the general was not a member of the Nazi party, but this man spoke as though he himself were. Val was curious, but decided she had best not appear too interested in his political beliefs. She yawned and subsided a little deeper into the rug. Then she closed her eyes as though to indicate she intended sleeping, that the conversation had become tiresome.

She hadn't expected to get away with that. She expected von Stamm to go on probing until he got some information useful to his quest, and was surprised when he made no effort to continue. The silence in the compartment was oppressive, nothing but the usual noise of railway cars in transit which one soon becomes accustomed to and doesn't hear. She stole a look from under her long lashes at the woman sitting next to her, to discover that she seemed to be sleeping quite soundly, to judge from the slow and rhythmic rise and fall of her chest. She looked more Spanish than French, Val thought.

Gradually Val found herself really becoming drowsy herself. The monotonous clickety-click of the wheels passing over rail joints became hypnotically soothing. But she couldn't dare permit herself to sleep. . . .

Then, abruptly, she realized that she *had* been sleeping, that she had been aroused by some noise in the compartment. She regained consciousness without having opened her eyes. Something was being dragged slowly across the floor. She opened her eyes just enough to see what was going on. Through the long fringe of her lashes she saw that von Stamm was pulling her bag toward him with his foot, his companion watching him. She almost smiled, thinking that this bit of cautious work the colonel was engaged in wasn't going to be very profitable. Not unless he was singularly interested in bits of lingerie and other such things.

Her fingers tightened on the book in her lap as she covertly watched von Stamm carefully open the bag. He thrust a hand in and explored for a minute or more before he became convinced there was nothing inside he wanted. If it was the book, it was easy for him to discover there was no such object in the bag. He closed it and with excessive care restored the bag to its former position.

He went through the same routine with the hatbox, with the

same result. He muttered a soft exclamation of disappointment and closed it. *"Nein?"* whispered his companion.

The colonel flashed a warning look at the other, whose whisper wasn't as inaudible as intended. Then, after the hatbox had been put back, von Stamm leaned against the cushion of his seat, staring coldly at the presumably sleeping girl. So did his friend. Val closed her eyes tightly once more, fearful they'd see she had been peeking, then changed her mind and opened them to match von Stamm's gaze with one just as frigid. "Not Gestapo?" she drawled. "Just curious about my underthings?"

For a moment he was completely nonplussed. Val was conscious that her hands had become sticky with cold perspiration. She had been foolish to speak, she thought. There was no telling what these men might do and no one to whom she could appeal for protection. The colonel recovered from his surprise.

"The moment for fencing has passed," he said. Where before he had endeavored to put some warmth into his grating voice, he now abandoned all pretense.

"So it seems," answered Val steadily. "It is now the moment for being inquisitive about other people's things. Or is it that loot is becoming so scarce that you have to search bags to get any? I haven't anything of value to you. No jewels, no—"

The man was on his feet, glaring wildly. "You accuse me of being a thief?" he shouted.

Val felt the woman next to her stir as though disturbed.

"I didn't accuse. I was just asking. After all, when one wakes to find a stranger searching her bags, what is one supposed to think?"

Colonel von Stamm sat down again, sullenly conscious of Val's mild contempt. "You have something which was stolen from my father," he accused. "It is my mission to recover it."

"Don't be such a fool," returned Val, somewhat startled at her own temerity. "I don't even know your father, and so far as I can remember, never have seen the old buck. There isn't anything in my bags that could possibly be useful to him, unless he wears the same sort of lingerie that I do. I shouldn't think so, really."

"What I am searching for was not in your bags."

"Well, what is it? How can I help you, if I don't know

what it is?"

He couldn't be certain she had the diary, she reflected, or there wouldn't have been all this sparring between them. But she didn't feel very confident she'd succeed in convincing him she hadn't.

Colonel von Stamm decided to ignore her. He turned to his companion and began a long conversation in German. Val felt herself relaxing, and then, as the train crawled over the miles, began getting drowsy once more. Little by little her drowsiness overcame her fears, and she slept.

Hours later a considerable uproar awakened her. To her astonishment, it was quite daylight. The train was in a station, but since she had never traveled this route before, she had no idea where she was. Colonel von Stamm and his companion were gone, and so was the mute woman who'd sat at her side. Val groped around in her lap for the book, which while she slept had slipped from her hands.

It wasn't there, and she had a very bad minute before she became aware of something pressing against her foot. Before dropping off to sleep she had slipped off her pumps. She reached down under the rug and a vast relief surged through her when her fingers closed over the slick-paper jacket of a book. Bringing it back up into her lap, she considered putting it in her bag, now that it had already been searched, but decided to keep it where it was for the time being.

Leaning back again as the train started up, she tried to catch the name of the village as they passed the station, but didn't see a sign anywhere. She hoped there would be food obtainable somewhere along the route. It would be a long journey without it.

Unconsciously, her thoughts still on food, her fingers toyed with the book under the rug. Suddenly her brows contracted and her eyes opened wider. The corners of the volume in her lap were sharply square—while those of the stolen diary had been rounded!

Val threw back the rug and brought the book out. The lurid jacket was the same, but now enclosed a cheap edition of *Don Quixote*. Val gasped with the realization she hadn't been nearly as clever as she thought.

Chapter Seven: TWO APPOINTMENTS

THE RUE LIMOGES wasn't much more than a shallow cul-de-sac extending some thirty or forty yards off the Cannebière, the small Hotel Dijon a U-shaped building enclosing its deep end. After the porter had deposited her baggage and withdrawn, Val gave the room to which she had been assigned a casual inspection.

It was oddly shaped, the walls forming half-hearted angles, an alcove bedroom a couple of steps higher and separated from the rest by a light railing of wood. Three dormer-hooded windows looked out toward the wide Cannebière and down onto the short street leading to the hotel.

Val shivered and turned away from one of these windows. She had arrived in Marseilles at the fag end of an icy six-day mistral which had not entirely blown itself out. Weary from the long night on the train, her nerves jaded after the tense situation, she had anticipated a good hot bath. The idea was all right, but the water in the tiny bathroom was cold.

She was lonesome, too, and to be both weary and alone is fine food for depression. In all this ancient city there was only the shadowy figure of a young Spaniard named Luis who might even be aware of her presence, and she felt no assurance that this friend of Ching's wouldn't be more of a liability than an asset. They'd often turned out that way.

Nostalgia, twin sister to loneliness, set in, providing pleasant pictures of things already done, softening Broadway's garishness through an aureate haze of time. Even the brilliance of Times Square was more clearly remembered than its underlying tawdriness and core of sophistry.

She'd liked the gaiety of Paris, too, finding it less exhausting than Manhattan's, and particularly in the matter of drinking. Back home you swigged zealously for the resultant kick, but in France there was greater deliberation, less whisky and more wine. Of course, you came out about the same, if enough wine was consumed, but it took longer.

But the wine of Paris was now a bitter vintage and Europe a shambles of dead and dying people, a morass of rotting hate

and fear, where human feeling and kindliness smothered under political dungpiles. If she succeeded in getting back to America with Ching, she'd not be tempted to Europe again.

She began taking things from her bag, opened on a chair, to strew about the top of the bureau. Picking up a washrag, in which were wrapped several bottles, she brought to view the flashy jacket of *Hearts in Flame,* and her heart missed a beat. Despite her baffled dismay on discovering the loss of the diary, she'd managed to forget it under the weight of problems attending her arrival in Marseilles. These were trivial but numerous. Even getting baggage removed from the Gare St. Charles to her hotel looked for a while like a full day's project.

One look at the cheap and gaudy book jacket served to bring her futile journey back into focus. Depositing the bottles on the bureau, she picked up the volume and slapped it down viciously on a handy table. After glaring at it for a moment, she picked it up, letting it fall open in her hands. It was still *Don Quixote,* if she'd expected any further transmutation of text. *Don Quixote,* in Italian—so she couldn't even read the damned thing!

Italian! Val's eyes cocked around at a window which she didn't consciously see. The woman who had sat next to her in the train—the mute! She might have been Italian, although at the time Val had thought she looked Spanish. But, whatever she was, had she taken the book while Val slept? Could be, she decided. The thought wasn't convincing, however. No doubt the woman was entirely innocent and it had been that irritating von Stamm who'd made off with the diary.

Another idea which grew every time it intruded was a doubt that the diary had actually been in her possession when she left Vichy. Reviewing the possibility that the substitution had been managed before leaving, Val couldn't remember having left it unguarded except for the moment she'd left Nedry in the bedroom while she'd gone to admit Emory. She'd made sure the newswoman had done nothing more than look at it.

She gave up. Either von Stamm had or had not recovered his father's *tagebuch* and except for the effect this news was going to have on Ching, Val wouldn't have cared greatly. But Ching would—to the point where he'd not be fit company for any girl

who put romance ahead of world politics and war. A timid thought fluttered around for a moment in her mind that perhaps romance properly came afterward—but then to remain.

She got a warmer outfit from her trunk and put it on—a suit that matched her tawny hair perfectly and had been her pride and joy when she got it, two years ago. That she hadn't had a new outfit since gave her a moment of wry amusement while she was getting into it. She hadn't quite finished the operation when the telephone rang.

There was a Monsieur Legarde who had the wish to see Mademoiselle Bright, if she would be so kind. He was at the moment waiting in the foyer, the clerk said, in the hope that mademoiselle would grant his request. And who was this Monsieur Legarde? Ah, but that was information the clerk could not supply—and then a new voice came on the phone, one which rumbled like the bellow of a distant bull.

"Mademoiselle Bright?" The voice did not hesitate for a confirmation. "I am Antoine Legarde, of the Café Abbaye. But it is of Mademoiselle Dupré I wish to speak with you. Will you join me—downstairs?"

Sheer curiosity decided Val, not any belief in what he had hinted about Georgette Dupré. The man might have some connection with Ching's plans for safeguarding the diary, but if so, he was much too late to do anything about this. She finished dressing and went down, using the stairway rather than waiting for the elevator.

M. Legarde, still standing at the desk, was the biggest Frenchman Val had ever seen. He was attired suitably for a high-noon wedding, a funeral, or possibly a duel—frock coat, striped trousers, a top hat, with lemon-colored gloves covering enormous hands. His shoes resembled somewhat oversized and highly polished flatirons. As she approached he pivoted around toward her, groping for his card case in an inner pocket.

"Mademoiselle Bright!" he accused, in a tone giving her full publicity to anyone in the small lobby. He handed a card to Val, who accepted but didn't bother to look at it.

"Yes, of course," she said. "What is it—about Miss Dupré?"

M. Legarde cradled his top hat on his arm and swept the lobby with eyes almost lost in the puffed fat of his round face,

mere twin bits of color that gleamed like the reflection of stars at the bottom of the well.

Clearly, though, he was looking for some place to sit, and his gaze came to pause on an odd-shaped bit of furniture somewhat removed from any other. This was an adaptation of the tête-à-tête sofa of the nineties, an S-shaped affair seating two persons, facing in opposite directions. Theoretically, the sitters turned their heads to gaze soulfully at each other.

Gathering Val's slim arm in his huge paw, he started toward this settee. Val came along—it was hardly optional. But, arriving, he seated her with a grand air. "It is good to see you once more, Mademoiselle," he said, bowing. His voice rebounded from the walls of the room, and then, much to Val's astonishment, she heard what sounded like the voice of an entirely different person, notwithstanding it came from the same source. This one was barely audible and spoke in English. "It is well to supply the impression that we have met before," he said.

Val couldn't think of anything better to say than a muffled "Oh!" But she smiled briskly, with a little nod like the ones she used in her dance and which meant nothing at all.

Legarde walked around the tête-à-tête and sat down, threatening to demolish the fragile piece with his bulk.

"Had I known the distinguished danseuse from the Casino de Paris was about to visit Marseilles, I would have—" His bellowing voice slipped into the undertone in English again. "Given you a more plausible reason than a dancing project in Algiers. However"—again his voice boomed in French for all to hear—"I wish to know if it would be proper for me to offer you an engagement at my café, the Abbaye, while you are in the city?" His voice sank into the sibilant undertone. "You will say to me that such an engagement requires consideration."

"I'd have to think it over, Monsieur Legarde," Val responded, as on a cue, and impressed by the man's remarkable lingual performance.

He nodded, looking off toward a group of men across the foyer pretty much as though Val weren't present at all, and lighted a cigar which was about as thick and long as a lead pencil. "Naturally," he replied, booming again. "But if you would give me the pleasure of taking dinner at the Abbaye,

you could see what manner of place it is. It is not too unpleasant, and while the money I can offer is not your due, it is, however, money."

Val looked at his profile obliquely, not at all sure whether he meant for her to accept the invitation or not, nor certain she wanted to dine at his café. What she saw didn't give her a clue. He opened his wide mouth cavernously to emit a thin trickle of smoke which curled out like a wasp of vapor from an almost extinct volcano. "You are very kind," she said, noncommittally. "And dancers must eat."

Legarde chuckled. "If it is food that makes a dancer, then I should be a veritable Nijinski," he observed. "I have spent much time and money in its destruction, but without becoming a dancer."

Val thought his effort at humor was really to cover a few seconds of considering something else. He rolled his massive head around and she was conscious of a scrutiny from the screened eyes. Then he continued: "And, since Marseilles is an impulsive city, it would not be wise for you to come to my café unescorted. I shall call for you here—at eight."

"That would be better," agreed Val, still not sure she would be waiting when he came. With due respect for caution, however, she felt rising interest in what was behind all this—if there was more than he spoke of.

His smaller voice murmured, even while another cloud of tobacco smoke went drifting upward from his thick lips, "You are agreeable, then?"

"Thank you."

He could take that for an acceptance, if he cared to, but Val didn't regard it as binding. Anyhow, a girl can always change her mind.

"I will come for you at eight, then. It will not be necessary to wear finery, unless it is your desire. My café is without regulations as to attire. Later, when publicity is desired, you may dress for the eyes of strangers."

Legarde pitched his huge form to his feet. Val was mildly surprised at his agility, deciding that his muscles were deceptively comparable to his size.

He bowed, apparently simply about to walk away, leaving

her sitting on this absurd piece of furniture. She got up and went along with him to a point opposite the desk, where she noted that the clerk was eyeing both of them with frank curiosity. "At eight," she said, stopping abruptly.

Legarde also paused, swinging around and tapping his hat brim against the side of his head in a gesture that recalled a similar one she'd seen done with a derby back in New York. He smiled. "*Oui,* at eight. *Bon jour,* Mademoiselle."

He swung off toward the hotel entrance, looking straight ahead. Val couldn't help staring at his broad back, marveling at the lightness of his tread. He must have weighed close to three hundred, yet he floated across the tiled floor almost without sound.

Returning to her room, she tried to busy herself with taking some of her dresses from the trunk and hanging them up to view their condition. Unable to concentrate on this task, she sat down at one of the windows to stare moodily down at the street, worried at the uncertainty of the situation. She didn't know when to expect Ching, nor what to do in the meantime. Although she had passed through three years before on a motor trip to the Riviera, she knew very little of Marseilles beyond the notorious fact that it wasn't recommended for unattended girls to prowl around.

Well, the hell with it—she was going to keep the date with Legarde! She couldn't sit around in a stuffy, chilly hotel for days waiting for Ching without some sort of excitement. The Frenchman was at least an incident, and moreover, he represented dinner. Val hadn't any idea what the food situation in Marseilles might be, but if it was anything similar to Vichy, a girl might well snap at an invitation from one who so patently knew where food was obtainable.

Late in the afternoon she decided to go out and have a look at the Cannebière. She had heard a great deal about this thoroughfare, but its reputed gaiety hadn't been apparent when she came through it on her way from the station. Perhaps, she thought, it was only gay at night—after the fashion of gay streets.

Standing before the mirror of the dressing-table, inspecting her make-up, her eyes slowly opened in wide surprise. Someone

on the street was playing that favorite of hers and Ching's, *Night and Day,* on a violin. It wasn't being well done, but it would be difficult for even a poor musician entirely to obliterate Cole Porter's moving air. Val hurried to a window and saw a blind street musician standing against a wall about halfway up the short street toward the Cannebière.

She stood watching him for a moment or two. *Night and Day* wasn't a melody likely to be heard from the instrument of an itinerant musician in France and this fellow played it so poorly Val believed he must have only recently picked it up. This needed investigation, she decided.

Tucking her purse under her arm, she went downstairs and out into the Rue Limoges. The musician was still playing the number, apparently having started all over again. Val, coming opposite where he was standing on the narrow sidewalk, stopped and after fumbling in her bag, got out a couple of coins, dropping them in the tin cup affixed to his arm.

"God will bless you for this, Mademoiselle," he murmured, scarcely audible above the music. "Particularly if you will go to the Cathedral Marie-Majeure at eleven in the morning."

"How do you know I am mademoiselle, if you cannot see?" demanded Val suspiciously. She had not previously spoken, so he could not have based a guess on her voice.

"One has a nose," he answered. "And a blind man soon learns to use his, and his ears as well. From the click on the pavement, your heels are high. Thus it is a woman who approaches. To my nose comes the definite aroma of youth—"

"Are you saying that young people don't have the same —er—scent as older ones?" exclaimed Val, who'd never noted such a phenomenon.

"The odor of a withered rose is not the same as a bud," he said didactically. "Nor does a young woman walk quite the same as an older one, even in the same style of shoes. Those who have sight do not always see the things the blind discover by other means."

"I suppose that's true. But, what is this business about going to church—" Val paused uncertainly as a fresh thought intervened. She looked closely at the man's eyes, which, however, were staring vacuously through her. She unconsciously lowered

her voice. "Are you—Luis?"

"One without friends has little need for a name," the man intoned. "However, it is not Luis. Philippe—perhaps. I have said that a troubled mind may find repose at the Cathedral Marie-Majeure—at eleven in the morning."

Abruptly the musician turned toward the Cannebière. Val caught at his arm. "Wait!" she said. "Tell me, where did you learn—why did you play *Night and Day?"*

"I have talked with you long enough!" he retorted sharply. "For your alms, *merci,* but for your questions I have no thanks. Adieu, Mademoiselle!"

He shuffled away along the narrow sidewalk. Val watched him dubiously until he reached the corner, a few yards distant, wondering for a moment whether or not the man really was blind. His eyes had looked it, but that wasn't conclusive. Now she decided that if he wasn't sightless, he gave an excellent performance, even to the peculiar posture of those long blind, leaning back slightly from the hips as though fearful of collision with unseen obstacles.

When she reached the broad Cannebière she saw him again, standing against a wall and preparing to play. Turning to the west, she passed close in front of him, her eyes slanted toward his sharp scrutiny. She saw nothing to indicate the man was aware of her nearness, but again that didn't prove anything.

She kept on in the direction she had taken until presently she reached the Quai des Belges, pausing there to stare absently at the bizarre collection of ships and small craft in the Old Harbor basin. Val, however, wasn't interested in any sort of ships. Across the harbor and mounted on the top of a steep hill she saw what seemed to be a large church edifice, and wondered if it was the cathedral spoken of by the blind man. An idler on the dock-side told her that it was not, but the Church of Notre Dame de la Garde. He seemed to hold the opinion that anyone asking such a question was extraordinarily uneducated.

As she retraced her way to the hotel, she began to sum up the observable difference between Vichy and Marseilles. Where Vichy displayed a thin pretense of belief in the new government, Marseilles—the little she had seen of it—seemed to be

existing in a fog of dull but hopeful waiting. She thought life here might not be as difficult as in Petain's capital, but the pervading atmosphere suggested a community hangover.

Chapter Eight: THE CAFE ABBAYE

THE CAFE ABBAYE faced on a crooked little street bordering on the Old Harbor district, a neighborhood distinguished entirely for its indifference to the nicer habits of living. The exterior of the café gave no indication to Val of what its interior might be like, as Legarde helped her down from the ancient barouche resurrected to become a public conveyance. Practically no street lights were to be seen, and very little other illumination.

"Nice neighborhood!" commented Val, as she hurried across the sidewalk clinging to Legarde's arm. She didn't care for the expression on the faces of those she could see on the narrow walk. She wasn't afraid; there were places in Paris she had visited that didn't cater to the church trade, either.

"It is Marseilles," rumbled the Frenchman. "Like a brawling wench, but not without interest."

Perhaps, reflected the girl, but brawling wenches had never been on her visiting list.

Passing through the foyer of the café, they came into a long room filled with tables. Wings opening from each side of this room, about two-thirds the distance from the entrance, gave the place the form of a cross. At the farther end of the main room was a stage, on which a show was in progress. Overhead, lost in darkness, the ceiling seemed to end in an angled peak, as though it were the under side of the roof.

"Except for the tables and the stage, this looks more like a church than a café!" Val exclaimed wonderingly. "Is that why you call it the Abbaye?"

"I did not give it that name," returned Legarde as they walked through the long dining-room to an unoccupied table. "It has always been called that—in part."

"In part?"

"*Oui.* It was once the Abbaye St. Cassian, of which this room was the chapel."

Legarde seated Val and eased himself into a wholly inadequate chair opposite her. He ordered wine, then turned his recessed eyes toward Val. She couldn't see them well enough to know whether he was looking at her or not, but thought he was.

"It was one of the oldest abbeys in France," he continued, "but during a riot a century or so ago it became a shambles which included a number of slain priests. Never was it an abbey again, but at one time or another has been almost everything else. There is more of it, too, than you see now—more than could be useful for a mere café."

"Interesting," commented Val, unenthusiastically.

"I think not to you, Mademoiselle." He chuckled softly.

"That's because I was thinking of something else," explained the girl. "When you came to the hotel, you told me on the phone that you wanted to speak of Georgette Dupré. But you never did."

"I must apologize for using the name as a ruse to persuade you to see me." The Frenchman searched an inside pocket of his coat, then brought out a folded paper and spread it on the table top. "This is your telegram to Mademoiselle Dupré, as you see. It bears the address of the Café Abbaye, and as your friend was unknown here, the telegram was turned over to me. What gave you to think she would be found here?"

"I—I was told to wire her at this address," replied Val, confused. She wanted to learn why he had intimated during their previous conversation that her presence in Marseilles had a veiled purpose, but she wasn't finding out anything.

Legarde shrugged his huge shoulders. "It is not my affair," he said, indifferently. "Perhaps merely my good fortune which brought you to Marseilles. You see, I have seen you dance in Paris—many times. And so often I have said to myself what a sensation you would be in my small café here. In those days, such a miracle was beyond hope."

Val laughed. "Your saints are better than mine—they deliver! Here I am!"

The café owner smiled absently, now scanning the menu spread before him on the table and taking a tentative sip of the wine the waiter had poured. Then, after ordering what seemed a considerable meal, his attention returned to his guest.

"Now you are in Marseilles, for some purpose you do not care to reveal. Very well—it is not necessary to me that you should. But you will find it useful, I believe, to have a good explanation why a young and beautiful dancer should be idling in a hotel here. And what could better serve than an engagement at the Abbaye?"

His argument was quite sound, Val admitted to herself, but she considered it for possible machinations while she tasted her wine. "What's the offer?" she drawled, vainly trying to see the man's eyes. "Do I dance for francs—or cookies?"

"Not the francs you earned in Paris," he answered. "But francs. You will see that the café is almost empty now, so I could not afford a large fee. I have the belief that your dancing will correct the lack of clientele I now experience."

"But I expect to be in the city for only a few days," demurred Val.

"For your number I would select the Jungle Cat interpretation I have seen you do at the Casino de Paris. An assured triumph!" He paused to sip his wine, and then continued in the same even tone, but with a hint of veiled meaning: "It may be that you will remain in Marseilles longer than you think."

"No longer than I can help—"

"I understand. But these are times of war and one does not travel without some difficulty." He smiled disarmingly but did not convince Val entirely of his ingenuousness. "I may even hope you will be here for some time. Have you the costume of the Jungle Cat in your luggage?"

Mention of her baggage gave point to Val's uncertainty about Legarde. She wondered whether he had more knowledge of what was in her bags and trunk than he displayed. But she nodded carelessly, glancing toward the stage where a voluptuous woman was singing a song the lyrics of which Val decided to ignore. "The costume fits very nicely into a shoe-box," she replied, grinning. "One of my closer friends informed me that a jungle cat really wears rather more fur."

"You will accept my offer, then? It is agreed?"

"I'll give it a try, Monsieur Legarde. To be frank, though, I'm nervous about working in a place like this."

"Nothing can happen to you here," he asserted. "You will be

guarded against any misadventure, Mademoiselle."

"*Any* misadventure?" Val was dubious. Monsieur Legarde was perhaps covering more ground than he knew.

"This I guarantee."

Well, she'd let herself in for it. There didn't seem to be any real objection to the job. The Abbaye wasn't anything like the glamorous spots she was accustomed to dancing in, but after all, it offered francs of which she had not too many, and, as Legarde had pointed out, made her presence in Marseilles more easily explained. Nevertheless, she would keep a wary eye on the mountainous Frenchman.

She couldn't make up her mind whether he was to be trusted or not. There was a certain illusory quality, almost furtive at times, about him that didn't quicken any sense of faith in her. However, Val's experience with men in general had built a defense not to be penetrated until she was pretty well convinced of their motivation.

It was near midnight when Legarde returned Val to the Dijon, a little bewildered that what she had expected would be an uneventful day could turn out so completely otherwise. She undressed slowly, considering the dancing engagement she had been maneuvered into accepting—if that was the case. Anyway, Ching should arrive before long and then she would be free to start on the journey to Lisbon.

Ching would have to consent to come along, or meet her there as planned, regardless of the loss of the diary. That was something she felt was gone beyond retrieving—and wasn't too unhappy about it. Quite satisfied, really, providing it wouldn't cause Ching to become difficult about going home. She was jealous of the book, anyway, and didn't relish facing the idea that he might not have agreed to return to America at all but for his damned *tagebuch!* Even if she had a rebel thought that she was kidding herself, she preferred to believe the pilfered diary was only incidental.

Legarde expected her to make her first appearance at the café at ten the following night. Val got the skimpy costume from her trunk and looked it over. Luckily, the Jungle Cat routine wasn't one that needed much rehearsing. She'd run through it in the morning.

Val yawned and sat down on the bed, squeezing and kneading her bare feet to ease the sensation that slippers leave. Her eyes brightened suddenly. In the morning! Where was it she was supposed to go then? Oh, yes—the Cathedral Marie-Majeure—to find repose for the troubled mind!

She rolled into bed and covered herself up, lying there for a while listening to unfamiliar street noises and thinking of the blind musician. Then she turned over on her side, resting her head on an arm. A cathedral might be a fine place to soothe one's turbulent thoughts, but she'd always found a comfortable bed had much the same effect. She rolled over onto the other side.

This wasn't one of those beds!

Chapter Nine: AT MARIE-MAJEURE

VAL AWOKE EARLY. The room felt warmer than when she'd gone to bed, but this wasn't because the management of the Dijon had done anything about it. The mistral had blown itself out.

She stopped at the desk on her way out to leave a message in the event Ching showed up that she would return by noon, then left the hotel to hunt up breakfast. The restaurant attached tc the Dijon wasn't being operated. A small café near by managed a cup of tea and some dingy rolls for her. Broiled fish could also be had, the waiter said, but Val didn't like meeting such a dish at breakfast. There wasn't anything else.

From the waiter she got directions on how to reach the Cathedral. The Cathedral Marie-Majeure, he explained, was on this side of the harbor, on a terrace near the entrance of the Bassin de la Joliette. Val found it with little difficulty. Its Romanesque-Byzantine architecture, carried out in green and white stone, didn't impress her. She'd seen loads of cathedrals here and there in France, all of them giving her the feeling of being museum pieces rather than places of worship.

She found a seat in the almost empty nave. No services were in progress and it wasn't long before she became drowsy and bored, then a little angry with herself at having been such a dope as to attach any mysterious significance to what the blind

musician had said. Very likely he was just one of those self-ordained missionaries encountered so often among physically impaired men. She thought about this for a while and then seeing by her watch that it was well after eleven got up and started out. Enough of this hanging around waiting for nothing!

About to reach the main doorway, she became conscious of someone hurrying after her, and darted a quick glance over her shoulder to see who it was. A yard or more behind she saw a small, poorly dressed woman. "Mademoiselle!" exclaimed her pursuer breathlessly. "Your prayerbook!"

"My what?" Val exclaimed softly. At first she thought she was being accused of carrying off one belonging to the church; then she saw what the woman had in her extended hand.

"Your prayerbook!" the woman repeated. "You have left it in the seat."

"I didn't have one," resisted Val, eyeing the object the woman was thrusting at her. "If it was on the seat, that's where it belongs."

"Non, non! It is yours," the woman insisted, coming closer. Her eyes, now that Val could see them, burned with feverish intensity. Then her voice dropped to a sibilant whisper. "It is this that you have come here for, Mademoiselle."

It was nice to discover that she had come for something, Val reflected fleetingly, but she didn't want a prayerbook. When she felt like saying a prayer, she could make up her own. Prayers read from a book smacked of the stock telegrams the companies keep for unimaginative senders. Nevertheless, she permitted the woman to thrust the book into her hand, whereupon the stranger scuttled back up the aisle.

Val looked at the prayerbook with a queer expression in her eyes. *I'm getting quite bookish,* she mused. *If this keeps on, I'll really have a library.* She let the book fall open in her hands and uttered a swift, small gasp at what she saw. This was no prayerbook, unless that of a German general who wished to make a record of his petitions.

The cover, however, was indubitably that of a book of prayer, with a large gilded cross stamped deep into the wine-colored cloth cover, and gilded letters across it reading *Livre de Prières.*

She tucked it under her arm, between her large flat bag and her body, then went on out into the sunshine, her thoughts in a welter of confusion. She had recovered the diary!

The sunlight was blinding for a moment or two after she had emerged. She paused on the steps, looking out across the blue, blue water toward an island which she knew from her previous visit to contain the Chateau d'If. Gradually her eyes became accustomed to the light and she started down the steps, only to encounter a fresh shock.

At the bottom of the steps, looking up at her as she descended, was a man she instantly recognized as the German who had been with von Stamm on the train—the one who spoke no English. Only, now he did. "Good morning!" he said.

Val stopped abruptly, staring at him. He was smiling in a quite friendly manner, with no trace of the uncomprehending expression he had exhibited on the train.

"Good morning," murmured Val, automatically. Then she recovered her temporarily palsied wits. "Fancy seeing you here! Or have you heard that one before?"

He bowed, his pale eyes gravely amused. "Many times," he admitted. "But I can't pretend surprise, since I followed you here."

"You did?" This was disturbing. "Why? Your friend said you didn't speak English. You've learned it quickly!"

"He was mistaken. I saw no need to correct him—then."

"Why are you following me?"

"One has orders," he answered. "Mine are that you are not to be lost to my sight. I find the instruction an entirely pleasant one."

"Oh, you do? Nice, smooth fellow with a good line!" Val paused long enough to mount one of her most intriguing smiles. "Well, come along—watch me back to my hotel. What a world! A girl can't even toss a prayer to her favorite saint without a Nazi highbinder tagging along after her." She started briskly around the building toward the Rue de Panier, which was the way she'd come.

The German's smile didn't falter. "What's a highbinder? I haven't learned that word."

Val wasn't any too sure herself. It was a word she'd picked

up from another girl back in New York, one with Chinatown affiliations. "I guess I don't know either, exactly. It's a Chinese that other Chinese don't care for. I suppose there are Germans, too, who don't care for Nazis."

"Without question."

"What's your feeling about them—those Germans who are anti-Nazi?" she demanded, with a quick glance at his now sober face.

"We are not permitted to have feelings—in any direction," he replied vaguely.

"You mean 'except in one direction,'" Val amended.

Her companion made no response, but walked along in silence until they reached the street. "There is news this morning," he said gravely. "News that may have significance."

"What news?"

"Large convoys of Allied ships are reported from La Línea to be at Gibraltar."

"So what?"

"I do not know. Perhaps it is an expedition against Dakar—in force, this time. The High Command would be interested in the true answer to your question."

A large convoy of Allied ships at Gibraltar meant just nothing at all to Val at the moment, as it meant little to anyone else not aware of its ultimate destination. "It leaves me cold," acknowledged the girl. "I'm not militarily minded, I guess. All I can think of is how long this misery is going to last."

They returned to the Cannebière on the tram, sitting in silence for the entire journey, mostly because the conveyance made so much racket that conversation was practically prohibited. One of the curious things about the French is their indifference to noise. Back in her native Terre Haute a car which created such an uproar would have resulted in public indignation meetings in the civic centers. But the French didn't seem to mind.

Val found herself stealing glances at the German's face. It always seemed composed, with no hint of the Nazi fury she'd become accustomed to in the expression of others in Hitler's camp. He was fairly tall, his hair a light brown and rather sparse, and his eyes a pale blue, but there was nothing about his

lean face or speech to indicate what part of Germany he came from. Val wasn't good at determining that, anyway, although she could usually identify a Prussian and knew he wasn't that.

They left the tram at the point where the Rue de la Republique becomes the Quai des Belges and walked up the Cannebière toward Val's hotel. She wondered what she was going to do with this man, where he would consent to take leave of her.

"Look, mister—" she began, then paused uncertainly.

"I am looking, Mademoiselle," he returned laconically, after waiting for her to continue.

"Do you have a name? Or has the new order gone in for numbering its children?"

"Not yet. My name is Otto Fleber; my rank, corporal."

"Corporal, eh." Val glanced obliquely at him from the corners of her eyes. "Wonder where you will be twenty years from now. Corporals seem to get ideas."

"Two have been recorded in history," Fleber retorted. "Two out of many thousands. But I don't think it is corporals you wished me to look at."

Val recalled what she had intended to say. "No, it wasn't," she said. "I was just going to make things easier for you by telling you what my plans for the afternoon and night are."

Corporal Fleber made a gesture with his hand. "It isn't necessary," he said lightly. "In any event, I shouldn't believe you and would have to watch just the same."

"Oh, all right, then. Have it your own way." Six steps farther on she spoke again. "By the way, whom do you work for—the Gestapo, or that stuffy von Stamm man?"

"Perhaps I work for the glory of the German Reich," he answered evasively.

"Okay—I was just curious. Nothing like a gentle snub to keep a girl in her place, is there?"

Corporal Fleber made no reply. They turned into the cul-de-sac that was the Rue Limoges and Val glanced at him curiously as they approached the entrance to the Hotel Dijon. Would he come in, even follow her upstairs to her room? She couldn't know—the man was unpredictable. But it mattered little to her if he did. What she had in mind to do was to run through the Jungle Cat routine and if he did a little keyhole

work while she was thus engaged, it couldn't help him much.

He stopped at the portal. "It has been a very pleasant morning, Mademoiselle," he said, with a stiff little bow and lifting the gray Homburg an inch or two from his head.

"Hasn't it, though." Val looked back at him, cradling her chin in her shoulder. "Thanks—for anything."

She darted in through the doorway, repressed excitement welling up. The retrieved book was still under her arm, rather well concealed between her bag and body, and she felt sure he hadn't noticed it. Strange that she should be elated at its recovery, though, when she had been so satisfied with the idea that it was gone forever. She decided that the feeling stemmed from her ordinary dislike of having anyone get the better of her.

The thing now that came to her mind was what to do with it. She didn't believe any effort at concealing it in her room was worth the trying. No one can successfully hide anything in a room, if the subsequent searcher knows it to be hidden there. This was an axiom she had learned from Ching, who knew all the tricks. Perhaps absorbed would be the better word, for she had seldom paid much attention to his dissertations on the subject and only his repetitions had impressed her memory. Anyhow, she had retained this idea.

Reaching her floor by way of the stairs, she saw a big china flower pot at the end of the hall. It was easily two feet across the mouth, and filled with dry sand in which an artificial plant was imbedded. The ideal hiding-place. A quick survey of the broad hall revealed no other person, and then she dug a hole for the diary, covering it smoothly with the sand and moving some discarded cigarette stubs from another spot to this one to make it appear even less recently disturbed. She made a mental note of the arrangement of cigarette butts for future reference, then brushed the sand from her hands, picked up her bag, and went on to her room.

Chapter Ten: INTERRUPTED REHEARSAL

IT WAS NOT until she had peeled off her clothes and got into the cat costume, hoping she hadn't put on any weight where unemployed dancers seem disposed to gather it, that the full

import of the returned diary struck her. She put down the orchestration of the dance music she had been looking at and frowned at the entirely innocent bust of a Grecian lady named Chloë, which stood on a pedestal between the windows.

Why, this made it clear that it hadn't been von Stamm or his partner who had taken it from her while she slept on the train. That is, if she'd actually had it then. This left the mute woman who'd sat next to her. When Val had waked up there hadn't been anyone at all in the compartment other than herself. She wondered whether there had been sufficient time since then for the book to have been rebound in the prayerbook cover. This question was one she couldn't answer. She decided she hadn't answers to any of the questions that swarmed into her mind, especially the big one: what had been the purpose in all this book juggling, only to restore it to her possession?

Oh, well, the hell with it! Ching had better hurry and get it before it disappeared once more. She picked up the piano part and began translating it into sound with a string of punctuated "da-da-da-*dah's,*" moving about meanwhile in a reasonable facsimile of the dance she'd engaged herself to do that night at the Abbaye. It wasn't much to look at, and there seemed a lot of mistakes in footwork and revisions to be made. Dancing, at least to a professional, is a serious business.

Current events began filtering back into her preoccupied mind. Instead of the endless succession of "da-da's" she found herself improvising a silly lyric to fit the score:

General da-da lost his book
Da-de-ah-da—da-da!
Sent sonny-boy along to find it
But sonny-boy went chasing girls
Da-de-ah-da—da-da!
And didn't seem to mind it!

Val paused, giving the Grecian lady another dirty look.

"It stinks, sister," she said, *sotto voce.* "Come on, Chloë, let's hear you do one. You've got a head and never have to worry about your feet—"

She broke off abruptly as footsteps sounded in the hall and someone began a light tattoo on the panel of the door.

"Now what?" she gritted, moving across the room to the

door. She opened it a mere crack and exhibited one eye to whomever was outside. To her mild astonishment, she saw Lotus Nedry, looking, as usual, pert and energetic.

"Hi, Val—open up and admit girl friend," the newswoman called, with a note of cheer that fell flat on the dancer's ears.

Val pulled the door open, still staring at Nedry with an expression of sheer disbelief. "Gawd!" she trilled. "And I thought you were safely left in Vichy!"

"Now don't think because you've that cat outfit on you have to live up to it," responded Nedry, coming in, then closing the door and leaning against it with her hands back of her on the knob. "This just happened. I've a bid to spend a couple of weeks at a villa near Hyères. It's only luck that I happened to look at the register downstairs while I was checking in. I hadn't the foggiest notion that you were stopping in this hotel. Really, I supposed you were on your way to Algiers."

Maybe it was like that, Val thought, but overexplanation is seldom convincing. The way Nedry had rattled it off indicated at least a mental rehearsal in preparation for an expected situation. "I'm not going to Algiers," Val said absently. Then, more assertively, "Georgette didn't show up—and I've an offer from the Café Abbaye."

"Café Abbaye?" Nedry hoisted short and naturally arched eyebrows.

"Yes. It's a dive—or did you know?"

"I didn't know. But still, in Marseilles—"

"In Marseilles anything off the Cannebière is a dive. That what you mean?"

Nedry shrugged and sat down on the edge of the bed, crossing her slim legs as part of the gesture. Female legs aren't particularly trustworthy indices of age, but Val for a fleeting second wondered how old the newswoman was. She surmised about thirty.

"All I know is what people tell me," Nedry observed indifferently. "Have you been there yet? Is it hot? Anything off the beam worth seeing?"

"Stick around and find out—unless you're in a hurry to get on to Hyères." Val picked up the sheet of music she had been studying and began a subdued "da-da-ing" again, moving about

to fit her routine to the beat.

"When do you start—or have you?"

"Tonight—da-da." Val made a quick clawing gesture with her left hand, like a cat making a pass at an insect. Then she swirled low to her left, making a complete revolution and coming up with another slashing motion with her right hand. The effect was somewhat marred by the sheet of music she still held. "Da-*dah!*" she said.

"Oh, do stop da-da-ing and sit down. I want to talk, and I can't do it with you pussycatting all over the room!"

"You could talk at mealtime in a zoo," Val asserted. But she came to rest with her haunches against the very solid bureau. The tail of the costume tickled one bare leg and she reached around to hoist the bit of fur to the bureau top.

Nedry laughed amusedly. "A cunnin' gesture," she said. "Do you mew while dancing?"

Val ignored this. "Well—go on and talk," she said. "Your pal, Jurg Sampson—is he along with you?"

Nedry's brows arched again, this time in pained surprise.

"Of course he isn't. Just because you've seen us together occasionally doesn't make him a pal, my pet." With a sudden heave, the newswoman lifted herself onto the bed, sitting against the headboard with her knees drawn up and high heels digging into the counterpane. She frowned at the bed's firmness. "As a matter of fact, though, he did say something about coming to Marseilles. He thinks there may be something cooking in North Africa. Is this a bed or a shop-window dummy they've stuck you with?"

Val eyed her visitor unenthusiastically. Nedry had the look of intending to make quite a visit. "Your garters will wreck your stockings, sitting like that."

"Round ones won't," returned Nedry, pulling up her skirt and glancing carelessly at the blue circlets. "The Spanish report from Algeciras there's a huge convoy of Allied ships at Gibraltar—"

"You sure do like to put on the cheesecake, don't you?" interrupted Val, still regarding the newswoman's shapely legs. "And how you keep 'em in silk stockings I'd like to know!"

"I got a lot of them from—oh, quite a while ago. As I was

saying, the Spanish—"

"Oh, I heard you. What difference does it make to us how many ships are at Gibraltar? We aren't sailing on 'em. Tell me where I can get one to take me home."

Nedry frowned. "You aren't interested in what's going on at all, are you? All you care about is little you and your pretty body."

"I care a lot for little me and my body—whether it's pretty or not—and my main idea is to keep 'em together. The war's no help."

"The complete nitwit, aren't you, Val?" She laughed harshly. "Only I'm not one of those who fall for your naïve line. You're plenty interested—even too much for your own good."

"What's that for?" demanded Val, moving away from the bureau toward her trunk, which was standing open. There wasn't anything she wanted from it, but she felt the need of movement to mask her interest in Nedry's expected amplification.

"You've got yourself mixed up in something your dancing schools didn't prepare you for," drawled the newswoman. "You'd best leave such things to Ching Dillon—he's good at it."

"What things?" Val was firmly admitting nothing, and she wasn't going to.

"Oh, nuts! You know well enough. Next thing you'll be telling me it's news to you that the Gestapo is hot after you —and Laval's police as well."

"They are?" trilled the dancer, fulfilling her guest's prediction with alacrity. "How perfectly thrilling! What do they want? Are they having a policeman's benefit or something? Like in New York?"

Nedry piled off the bed with fine disregard to stocking casualty and stood up, glaring at Val in a flash of furious anger which receded as quickly as it came, to be succeeded by an expression of sophisticated superiority which wasn't any more pleasing, although neither expression caused Val any distress.

"Go on—be a dope!" Nedry sneered. "All I can say is that you'll be screaming for help before you get through with this business you've hooked onto. And you won't get any from me, sister! I could do a much better job of moving contraband out

of France than you ever can."

"Of course." Val nodded emphatically. "I should say that smuggling was just your dish, if there was any to be done. You have such an innocent face."

"The job is large enough to split more than two ways," Nedry went on, choking back a less constructive retort. "But, no, you and your boy friend have an idea that you can outsmart the Gestapo and Laval's stooge cops without any help. But you'll wish you were back waving your body in some chorus line before you're done with it."

"You're the most amazing person, Nedry—" Val began placidly. The newswoman cut in as she smoothed her dress over her hips.

"Oh, dry up! I'll tell you one thing, though, ba-aby—it's not only the Gestapo and Vichy cops you'll have to deal with. There's still another party, one with orders to get what it's sent after at any cost—and this outfit can make Himmler look like John the Baptist!"

"After he was beheaded? For Herr Himmler, that would be an improvement."

The newswoman stamped across to the door and pulled it open. She looked back over her shoulder at Val, with an expression of factitious sincerity. "I'd be sorry to hear that something ghastly had happened to you."

"Even if it was a good news story?" Apparently Val wasn't much moved, but nevertheless she felt a twinge of vague alarm. She groped around for something to cover up with, determined to admit no hint of knowing what Nedry had been pounding at. "Ah—when are you off to Hyères? Or was that just one of your gags? Is this act you've been running through another one? I wouldn't know. I'm kinda dumb, I suppose."

"My movements are none of your damned business! But play dumb if you want to. I've other cards for you to look at—when I'm ready to show 'em!"

Nedry went out, pulling the door shut with a vicious slam. Val stood still for a nonplussed moment, then turned toward the sculptured Chloë on the pedestal. "You see, Chloë? That's what happens when you get chummy with other women—or let them get chummy with you. They start getting into your

hair and get mad when it doesn't come down for 'em."

She stood posed thoughtfully for a short while, then, abandoning fruitless conjecture on the newswoman's "other cards," she resumed her interrupted rehearsal. If she was going to make any kind of showing at Legarde's café that night, she had work to do. The routine didn't come to mind as readily as she had imagined, but it had been over a year since she had even thought about it.

Some time passed before she was interrupted again. Once more the badly played strains of *Night and Day* floated up from the pavement through her open window. Val went over and looked down into the little street. Almost in the same spot where she'd first seen him was the blind musician.

For a moment she stood watching in indecision. She didn't question the probability of the man's having another message of some sort for her, but this was a hell of a way to do business! She couldn't go rushing into the street every time he came into it playing *Night and Day*. If Ching's underground was going into the Western Union business with messages at all and inconvenient hours, why didn't they work out some less disturbing method of delivering them? Still, this one might be from Ching. She dressed hurriedly and went downstairs.

The blind man had stopped playing when she reached the sidewalk and seemed about to shuffle away dispiritedly. Val, noting that her erstwhile companion, Corporal Fleber, whom she had passed in the foyer, was now standing in the hotel entrance behind her, restrained her impulse to hurry. There wasn't any need for it, anyhow. The blind man's cautious steps weren't taking him away very fast.

Val passed him, then, as if on an impulse, retraced her steps, fishing a coin from her bag and dropping it into the cup.

"Merci," he droned listlessly.

He hadn't added "mademoiselle" as he had before. Val glanced from under her lashes at the German loitering in the hotel entrance. He was showing signs of starting out after her. It wouldn't do to get into another prolonged talk with the musician.

"Speak quickly, Philippe!" she exclaimed. "We are being watched."

"God will favor a young woman in a light coat who passes the Bourse at seven," he murmured. Then he brought the violin to position and began playing a quite different air. *My Heart at Thy Sweet Voice.*

Obviously he'd said all that he intended, so Val turned and strolled off toward the Cannebière. Now she had to go somewhere to prevent the tagging Fleber from getting any notion that her brief speech with the musician was more than casual. She hadn't the faintest idea of where to go, but turned up the Cannebière, which was showing more signs of life as the afternoon waned.

She took the corporal for quite a stroll before she returned to the little Hotel Dijon—to the Palais de Cristal and back.

Chapter Eleven: THE BLACK SATYR

A FEW MINUTES BEFORE SEVEN Val tried unsuccessfully to slip away from the hotel. Corporal Fleber was clinging to his work with a tenacity which might have been admirable to his superiors, but not to Val. He caught up with her before she got clear of the entrance. "Where now, little one?" he asked politely. "Of course, you aren't forced to say, but later I shall be able to answer the question myself."

"Don't girls in your home town eat?" snapped Val. "I've a dancing engagement for later tonight, and I'll need some strength."

"Oh, I see." Fleber's little smile never wavered. "You are now going to dinner. How nice. I have had no dinner either. Will you be my guest?"

Val stopped on the sidewalk and faced him, her eyes blazing with more annoyance than she customarily permitted them to display. "No!" she exclaimed. "It's bad enough to be trailed everywhere I go by a Nazi storm trooper—or whatever you are —but I've certainly no intention of going to dinner with one."

"That is a mistake," he demurred. "War is not the personal thing—even we whose nations are at war could be friends."

"Not where I come from," retorted Val, marveling a little at her suddenly changed viewpoint. "With Americans war is a very personal matter, while we're at it."

"I could be your friend." It was a simple statement, his blue eyes even a little wistful, and the fixed smile still playing about his lips. But Val couldn't be taken in by anything like that.

"While you wear the collar of the Nazi gangsters you won't."

"I wear no man's collar," he asserted patiently.

Val could only answer that inelegantly. "Baloney!" she declared with feeling and turned to go.

Fleber caught ineffectually at her arm, then stood watching as she hurried away, making no immediate attempt to follow her. Val walked quickly to the Cannebière, turning the corner toward the harbor with a swift glance backward. The German was still standing where she'd left him.

She realized there was no prospect of his remaining behind, however, and accelerated her footsteps along the broad sidewalk, thankful for the swiftly approaching night. Others were strolling here, and she tried to make use of them to screen her from Fleber when he reached the corner behind her. A couple of furtive backward glances didn't disclose his easily identifiable outlines, but she couldn't be sure, since passers-by obscured the view.

The huge structure housing the Bourse loomed up. Fortunately it had caught her interest earlier, while walking toward the Quai des Belges, at least enough to cause her to identify it.

She wondered what was in store for her now. Would it be Ching waiting somewhere in the shadows? She hoped so. This going about alone in Marseilles streets at night wasn't just the safest thing a girl could do, according to all she'd ever heard of the city, even in the comparatively respectable parts. She looked again over her shoulder and her heart stepped up its beat as she saw someone at a little distance behind her that had too great a resemblance to the German corporal to be anyone else.

Now she was in for it, she thought with quick alarm. The worst of it was that she was wearing, in accordance with the blind man's instruction, a light-colored polo coat which made her easily visible and identifiable to the man following.

Her mind raced as she grappled with the problem. She mustn't lead Fleber to the person who was waiting for her. But it was too late now to change her course. Already she was pass-

ing the front of the building where she believed someone would be expecting her appearance.

But hurry! That's what she must do—hurry. If anyone spoke to her from the shadows she would have to give quick warning that she was being followed and keep on going.

She began to feel a trifle easier as she neared the other end of the dark building, walking close to it in order to speak out her warning as softly as she could. It didn't work out according to her plan. When she spoke, it was not cautiously.

A hand was on her arm before she had even suspected the owner's presence and with no time for more than a sharply gasped "Oh!" she found herself pulled roughly into the shadows of the building. Then a stranger thing happened. The figure of another girl wearing a light-colored coat stepped out and continued down the street in the same direction Val had been going. The substitution was done so smoothly and quickly that anyone following would have supposed the person followed had merely disappeared momentarily and then reappeared.

"I am Luis!" a voice spoke quickly into Val's ear, so quickly as to be almost a hiss. "Remove the coat, *pronto!*"

Val tried to twist around to see the speaker but, because strong hands were tugging at her coat as though to speed its removal, wasn't able to do it. A retained impression of Fleber stalking after her stilled her instinctive resistance and she allowed the coat to slide off into the stranger's hands.

She snapped her head around, now unimpeded by his grip on the coat, and discovered there were two men there, flattened against the stone of the building. Neither was very large, but that was all she could be sure of in the absence of light. Then she heard footsteps passing and glanced back at the sidewalk. It was the corporal, after the strange girl in the light-colored coat in long, swinging strides.

The tableau against the wall held until Fleber disappeared in the direction of the harbor, then the shorter of the two men moved out. Val, not having seen which one had declared himself Luis, wasn't able to tell which had been the one who spoke. She examined the one who now came from the shadows with sharp interest. His clothing was in the fashion of a Parisian *apache,* but his face was not. He was obviously a Frenchman,

therefore he could not be Luis, the one who had spoken.

"Please follow, Mademoiselle Bright," he said softly. His eyes, meeting Val's, seemed pleasant and entirely unexcited.

He began walking the short distance to the Rue Elizabeth, on which the western wall of the Bourse faced, almost disappearing as he turned into the deeper gloom of the little street. Val found herself marching along after him, with the man who must be Luis at her side. "You are Luis?" she asked, trying to make her tone casual and wondering why she did so as she spoke.

"Sí, Señorita."

The voice was liquid, of a musical quality, but flattened by what at least sounded like weary indifference.

"What gives, brother?" demanded Val. She eyed him covertly without success, as his features were barely discernible in the darkness.

"All will be explained later—very soon," he answered.

"Be quiet!" snapped the figure ahead.

They walked in silence and after a couple of blocks turned into another street—sordid and mean. The buildings lining its sides appeared to lean wearily against each other in the manner of houses that have stood too long. A few lights shone from some of the windows and they passed occasional groups of idlers who evinced some curiosity about the intruders.

There was a strong resemblance to the neighborhood of the Abbaye, but Val was sure her sense of direction wasn't wrong in placing Legarde's café some distance away.

A garishly dressed harridan, issuing abruptly from the basement entrance of one of the houses, stopped to stare at Val as the trio passed. She placed her hands on wide hips and screamed something in French that Val didn't catch, then spat vigorously and contemptuously on the pavement close to the girl's feet.

Luis's dark eyes flashed in quick anger as he saw this. It was, curiously enough, the first real look at him Val had managed. He halted before the street woman and without a word slapped her resoundingly on the cheek with his open palm. She staggered back against the building, raising her hand to the smitten cheek. It hadn't been severe enough to check her powers of speech—and they were powers, indeed. Her command of French

extended into idiom that Val hadn't encountered even in some of the more vicious resorts of the Montmartre.

But nothing happened. It was merely a gesture of the resentment the damaged sister feels at the sight of one she believes untarnished. As they started up again Luis took Val's arm, with the Frenchman on her other side, to avoid such incidents.

"Nice places and people I'm mixing with!" Val exclaimed, looking closely at Luis's face. There was a moment of baffled recollection, then: "Oh—now I know! The Spanish woman on the train!"

Luis returned her stare calmly. Now Val discovered what she would long remember as the saddest eyes she'd ever seen, like those of a stricken animal. There was little animation in the boy's face—for he was a mere youngster wearing a singular mask of age. His body seemed slight, undernourished, but carried with a nervous energy that denied it.

"I am Luis," he replied. "Always Luis, without regard for what you have seen. Tonight I wished to speak with you, but not to identify myself to others at the Dijon as one who knew you."

"Where are we going now?" Val asked. "And for what? This walking around—"

"*Lo siento, Señorita*—oh, very sorry! But I could not arrange otherwise." He didn't seem to be overly distressed, however. "We are going in here. It is a place where we will not be disturbed. Later, Señor Dillon is to join us."

"Oh—has he arrived in Marseilles?"

"I think not yet, but he should very soon."

Luis turned into a narrow passage between buildings, lighted dimly by a lantern suspended from a bracket set in a wall. Val and the Frenchman followed, passing just about as evil a looking man as the girl had ever before encountered. He leaned negligently against one of the walls, both arms and legs crossed, and his hard eyes gleamed at Val from under an oversized beret, watching her with the steady intensity of a stalking cat.

"I'd hate to come here without a convoy," she said nervously.

"You would not be admitted—even if you got this far," observed the Frenchman. "Raoul, the man we've just passed, has his orders and is quite savage in carrying them out."

They came out of the passage into a small, triangular-shaped court, contained by the walls of three separate houses, from which issued a babel of voices and strange noises. This was a garden, but not the sort illustrated in home-lovers' magazines. A few struggling, discouraged-looking bushes, wisps of impoverished grass, and, cornered in one of the angles, a huge sculpture of a satyr playing a pan's pipe, carved from some black material.

Crossing the triangle, they came to a sunken door, over which had been scrawled in black letters, *Le Satyre Noir*. The Frenchman pushed this door open and then Val found herself in a candlelighted room containing a number of tables scattered about and a small, high bar rather reminiscent of a magistrate's bench against one wall. Sand gritted unpleasantly under the thin soles of her pumps, and she saw that the floor consisted of brick with a sprinkling of sand spread over it.

The walls were of buff-colored plaster, with patches of another shade where it had been renewed. Other spots, not having been repaired, revealed ancient lathing. The walls were quite good enough to contain the sour odor of spilled wine mixed with other scents not easily identified.

The only person in sight as the trio entered Le Satyre Noir was the proprietor, a fat and swarthy Frenchman who looked amazingly like Pierre Laval and wouldn't have thanked you for reminding him of it. He sat on a high stool behind the bar, greeting them with a grave nod as though merely conceding permission for their presence.

Dulonne, Luis's companion, led Val to a table near the wall opposite the bar, while the Spanish boy crossed the room to speak to the proprietor. After a brief colloquy, he came on to the table and sat down.

"No word of Señor Dillon as yet," he said. Then it occurred to him to introduce his companion to Val. "A friend, Señorita. Monsieur Dulonne. One well acquainted with the Old Harbor district—and to move swiftly here, without confusion, it is well to have at hand one who has this knowledge."

The little Frenchman beamed pleasantly at Val, but said nothing. Luis, dismissing him as a subject for conversation, continued: "The thing so treasured by Señor Dillon—it is safe,

si?" He nodded as Val was about to reply, his eyes having gathered her answer before she could speak. "It is not necessary for you to tell me where it is. After losing it on the train, I am certain you have been careful."

"You took it!" accused Val, almost sharply. "Mister, you had me in a five-star panic for a while!"

"Once more I am sorry, but it could not be avoided, that. When you fell asleep, the—the thing slipped from your lap to the floor, under the robe. I could know from the German's eye that he would lift the robe before he went away and find it. Or you might have unconsciously pushed it into view with your foot. I bend to loosen the string of my shoe, and my foot was very near the bottom of the robe, where is also this other thing." Luis seemed unwilling to risk even naming the diary. "So I get it before I again sit up. Then I have a thought of the *Don Quixote* which is in one of my packages to help give it weight. I decide to put it where the other was, because I see the German knew you had something in your lap before it slipped down. This was not so easy, but I change the cover and put the *Don* by your feet."

Luis paused a moment, his grave eyes expressing a shift in his thoughts, which was about all they ever did show. "You have the pretty feet, Señorita," he said.

"Thanks, mister—but what happened then?" Val knew about her feet, but she didn't know the rest of Luis's story and wanted it without side trips.

"So then I seem to sleep also, but I watch. After some while, this German von Stamm, whose throat it would be a pleasure to cut"—the brooding eyes displayed a quick flash of animation—"he came to you and lifted the robe from your lap. He saw the *Don* at your feet and his eyes became shining as he snatched it up. But a look inside and the shine went away. He put it back and covered you with the robe again, then left the train at Avignon. His companion went to another car, and I to still another, until we are in Marseilles."

"But when did you have the cover—"

Footsteps gritting on the sand-covered floor stopped her and she glanced around to see the proprietor waddling toward them, carrying a dark bottle and glasses. He placed them on the table,

then filled the glasses with a dark red wine.

"Messieurs!" he said, in a cracked guttural as he picked up a glass and held it high before him. *"Pour la patrie!"*

"Saluta!" returned Luis, reaching for a glass.

Val and Dulonne joined in the toast, although Val lost a lot of enthusiasm for the gesture at the touch of the wine against her tongue. If she had to drink wine, she liked it sweet, and this stuff thoroughly was not.

Apparently satisfied, the proprietor waddled back to his throne behind the bar, where he sat watching them with grave interest, although it was obvious he could not hear Luis's softly pitched tones at that distance.

"In Marseilles," resumed Luis, "I locate my friend Dulonne, who is also a comrade. It was he who undertook to give the thing a new dress during the night. Then we arranged with Madame Dulonne to return it to you, of which you know already."

"I suppose I do. You sent the blind man into the Rue Limoges to play music which Mr. Dillon had told you would attract my attention. This is easy enough to figure out now."

"Poor Philippe!" exclaimed Dulonne, his eyes twinkling. "All the night he spent learning the song, which he had never heard before."

Luis lifted his glass and tasted the wine again. It didn't seem to please him. Replacing it on the table, he twisted his head around to glance at the proprietor with a faint expression of disapproval.

"If he were not the comrade—" he muttered darkly. Then, dismissing the thought, he glanced at the entrance. "But why does the Señor Dillon not come?"

Val couldn't repress a rueful smile. "The Señor Dillon," she drawled, "does not ever keep a date—with me!"

An hour drifted by, but Ching Dillon did not come to Le Satyre Noir. Conversation had long since dropped to a low ebb, and Val was becoming weary of the interminable waiting.

"I am to dance at the Café Abbaye at ten," she suggested, finally.

Luis said he was aware of this. "Monsieur Legarde has taken care that all Marseilles will know that the celebrated dancer of

the Casino de Paris is to perform at his café tonight. There has been placed on a wall at the side of the entrance a very large painting of the Señorita—"

"Executed with greater haste than artistry!" interrupted Dulonne, smiling reminiscently. "Perhaps it is even a portrait of some lesser dancer, but under it in the largest letters are the words, *Mlle. Valerie Bright, Danseuse Charmante. Extraordinaire—*"

Val interrupted them both. "This person, Legarde—is he known to you?" Val glanced from one to the other inquiringly and settled on Dulonne as the more likely one to have the answer. "I've been bothered about what his game is. If he's up to anything, I mean."

"He is the showman," Dulonne replied, as though that explained a great deal in itself. "At times he has been of use to our organization, but we are not so simple as to give our entire trust to anyone unproven by the taking of personal risk. Monsieur Legarde is not one to expose himself to danger, even where a private profit might be had."

"He came to the hotel to offer me this engagement," explained Val. "Yesterday. He had a telegram which I had sent to Georgette Dupré—"

"That was the address we gave in our telegram to you—his café," interrupted Dulonne. "This was to give it more an appearance of authenticity. It was unnecessary that we receive your reply, of course. Legarde, it would seem, took the liberty of opening it, and I have no doubt he was both pleased and surprised at the contents."

Val pondered over this for a moment. "I guess it doesn't really matter," she said slowly, "but I'm not sure he doesn't smell something in the woodpile. He went through the dog-gonedest act in the hotel lobby—speaking at the top of his voice in French and then while he looked as though waiting for me to answer, sticking in what he really wanted to say in English."

"Monsieur Legarde was making a performance to impress you, I think," stated Dulonne, after a little contemplation. "He succeeded in this, did he not?"

"He did." Val smiled at the memory of her bewilderment at the time. "Are you sure he doesn't play his fiddle on both

sides? Do for your enemies what he also does for you, if the pay is better?"

Dulonne hoisted his eyebrows and shrugged his expressive shoulders. "We have met such a thing before this," he said. Then, his pleasant eyes showing a flash of grimness, "Be assured, little one, that we have ways of attending such a situation."

"Shall I dance there tonight?" Val demanded flatly, glancing at Luis.

"I think you need not have fear to do that," replied the Spanish boy. "Myself, and others, will be in attendance." He turned to Dulonne. "Are you well acquainted with this Abbaye, Señor? I have been informed that it once was actually a church building. If this is so, and is like others I have seen, it will have many odd corners and places of concealment."

"We have often used the Abbaye since the Armistice, sometimes for rendezvous and at others to remove a hunted comrade from view." Dulonne nodded vigorously. "Indeed, Comrade Luis, I am well acquainted with each stone in the Abbaye, for I have been several times in the role of the escaping fox."

"Good!" commented Luis. "Then this would be a very good place to arrange the meeting between the Señorita and Señor Dillon later tonight, when he arrives. The Señorita will be there on a legitimate errand, and it should not be too difficult for him to go there."

"*Vraiment!* The dressing-rooms are under the entertainment floor, in a wing. It will be very simple to guide Monsieur Dillon there, with no one suspecting his presence."

Val frowned. "Why does he have to hide?" she demanded. "Do the Germans just suspect him, or have they definite information of this business?"

"They have a strong suspicion only," answered Luis. "But a suspicion they intend to explore with the usual Nazi thoroughness. We hope to keep the news of his arrival here from them. If they believe he has possession of the thing they want, they will be less concerned with you, who really have. But they will be watching you with the hope you will lead them to where he is concealed, whether that be in Marseilles or elsewhere."

"Who are 'they'?" asked the girl. "Is there someone besides

von Stamm? The Gestapo, maybe?"

"The Gestapo is interested, but so far have made no moves that we are aware of," Dulonne stated. "They employ men more skilled in this sort of affair than von Stamm, so we are not sure about them."

Another angle struck Val as she studied the Frenchman's face. "Why are you fellows so interested in the success of Mr. Dillon's efforts?" she asked. "Oh, I know, he's been playing ball with you for a long time, but this doesn't seem to have very much to do with your work."

"It is important to us that the information contained in that item be spread for the world to read," Dulonne replied. "And he has another mission for us that I cannot tell you about now."

"Okay." Val glanced at her watch, surprised to see how late it had become. It was well after eight o'clock. "Does this place serve food? I must eat something very soon. I can't dance right after eating, and, my friends, come war, come anything, I do better if fed."

"There is no food here—only very poor wine," said Dulonne, regretfully. "But we will go elsewhere, and then return you to your hotel."

Chapter Twelve: JUNGLE CAT

THE DRESSING-ROOM Val found herself in at the Abbaye was in a section under the east wing of the entertainment floor. It wasn't anything like the sumptuous affairs pictured in the movies, either, but an almost barren, none too clean, stone-walled cell. In fact, when the building was erected sometime in the dim past, these erstwhile dressing-rooms had been planned as sleeping quarters for the friars, apparently in the tradition that comfort stimulates earthy ideas.

There were two rows of these rooms, with a wide corridor between, and an astonishing assortment of noises emanated from them to mingle in a cacophonic melée at a double row of wash basins running down the center space. If the performers wanted water, they dipped it from a huge tub standing on the floor at the end.

The discord of strident voices was entirely feminine in origin.

Val decided that male performers very likely were a flop so far as amusing the patrons of the Abbaye went, or else they dressed in some other part of the building. The only man she'd seen since Legarde had escorted her through the restaurant, with a great show of pride in his capture of the dancer from Paris, was the orchestra leader, a pasty-faced Provençal named—or called—le Clairon.

Le Clairon had taken her to an unused room in another part of the basement, where she had gone through her routine while he tapped out the piano part of her music on an ancient black instrument. After about twenty minutes of concentration on the number she planned to do, she returned to the dressing-room, quite convinced that if the man even played the right music she'd be lucky. His interest in her had a definite slant to the physical side, if she'd learned anything about men.

She sat down before the streaked mirror and began doing things to her face. It felt rather strange to be doing this sort of thing again, after so long a time. The make-up job (which would by no means end with her face) continued and she began wondering about Ching and his hoped-for appearance.

Val hadn't brought the precious diary with her, as she had at first intended, her native caution asserting itself at the last minute. She was still determined to return it to Ching to do with as he liked, and then at the first chance leave for Portugal. He would have to make other arrangements for its transportation from Marseilles on. There was a limit to what a girl can take of enemy surveillance and she was already out of bounds. There Germans played rough, and for keeps.

True, they hadn't pulled anything yet on the physical side, but they were likely to, if circumvented to the point of exasperation. No, it was better that Ching handle this by means of his underground pals. It was no job for amateurs.

She'd have to be in Lisbon by November 16th, if Emory's preparations for their sailing were to be useful. This was the sixth, which left her ten days for the trip. Of course, she could chuck this dancing job at any time. She had stipulated her pay was to be given her after each night's performance, mostly because of a tough shrewdness acquired through previous misadventures.

A few minutes before ten Marthe, a leather-faced old woman who seemed to manage things in the dressing-rooms, came to tell her that her act would be on in a matter of minutes. Val, repressing a sigh of disappointment that Ching had not put in an appearance, pulled a dressing-gown around her shoulders and started for the dark stairway to the upper regions.

She could hear the booming voice of Legarde personally announcing her impending appearance. That he was swelling with gratification was evident from his words. Val climbed the stone steps to the stage level, bumping into a pair of descending and practically nude performers on their way down. They commented rather freely on the incident, but Val was too interested in what Legarde was saying to make a suitable retort.

She stopped in the wings while he was finishing his speech, which he brought to a close rather quickly on seeing the slim figure of the dancer standing there. He bowed to his audience and came toward her while the orchestra leader waved his musicians into the introductory phrases of Val's dance music.

"It is magnificent!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Never since the unfortunate Armistice has the Abbaye drawn such a crowd. Many have not been able to enter."

Val was tapping a silver-slippered toe in cadence with the music, her eyes absently staring at nothing. "It must be the ballyhoo you've put on," she replied. "I'm not that good."

"You are too modest—"

In another second the orchestra would be past her entrance cue. Val didn't trust them to go back a few bars to pick it up again. Not after the skimpy rehearsal she'd had. She slipped around the mountainous Legarde, moved gracefully into view on the stage and stopped, one knee drawn up, her hands before her making cat-like gestures of clawing.

She needn't have worried so much about the orchestra. The ovation that thundered from the tables at her entrance completely drowned out the music. It wasn't in character, but Val couldn't resist a quick glance at the assembly.

Legarde had spoken truly. The place was packed, with standees at the rear where there were no tables. The ones she could see, those closer to the stage, didn't look like a particularly high-grade audience, and almost all were men, with a

mere sprinkling of obviously experienced women.

Val bobbed her head in response to the applause she hadn't at all expected, caught the beat of the music again, and went into her routine. She was conscious of a pleased surprise at the orchestra, deciding this le Clairon must have been better than she'd supposed. Then she gave her entire attention to the intricate steps and convolutions of the dance, forgetting there even was an audience.

This was her usual custom. Val always gave the impression that she danced from sheer enjoyment, inventing each step as she went along, which was a long way from fact. Dancing was really a serious business and the gaiety expressed in some of her other routines pure artifice. In this number there wouldn't be any place for that until she reached the conclusion. She was being a cat, with all her concentrated effort—and such a cat!

Once more the stones of the ancient abbey echoed a thunder of applause as she finished. She stood in the wings, making the usual bows, still amazed that Legarde had managed to attract such an audience. He hadn't had much time to exploit her appearance here, and the audience obviously wasn't composed of the sort who might have seen her in the Casino de Paris.

A glimpse of the placid face of Corporal Pleber, sitting at a table, abruptly changed the trend of her thoughts. He was not alone. It was the sight of von Stamm that had sent the chill up her spine. She hadn't known he was in Marseilles.

Taking her last bow as the applause lessened, she turned back into the wings, caromed off a lusty chanteuse coming on to diminish the atmosphere of art with a bawdy ballad, and plumped into the spread arms of Legarde. He seemed rather pleased to find her there, but Val lost no time in getting clear of his ham-like hands. *"Splendide!"* he enthused.

"Yeah?" gasped Val, marveling at the solidity of the seemingly flabby paunch from which she'd just bounced. "If I could get over like this in the Rainbow Room, it would mean something. Even here it brings a nice, ringing sensation in the ears."

She took her dressing-gown from a table, pulled it around her shoulders, and started for the stairway. The woman she had collided with was singing now, her voice rather pleasing even if

the lyrics of her song did reflect the sweet, fresh quality of sewage.

Val had vaguely expected Legarde to follow her to the dressing-room, but he came only to the top of the stairs, saying that her salary would be brought down to her in a few moments.

"And when you are ready, Mademoiselle, I will provide escort for your return to the hotel," he added. "I myself cannot attend this, which I entirely regret."

"I'll let you off tonight," she answered frivolously and clattered down the stairs, troubled with a sudden idea that Corporal Fleber and von Stamm might come to her dressing-room and find Ching, if he had arrived and was waiting there for her.

Near the bottom of the stairs she saw the little Frenchman, Dulonne, standing against a wall, apparently much interested in two scantily clad girls experimenting with dance steps on the other side of the room. His faced lighted up as he saw Val coming from the stairway.

"All is well, Mademoiselle," he said softly as she came opposite. He did not shift his stand and Val caught the idea that he might not want her to show too much interest. "Monsieur Dillon has arrived and will come to your dressing-room shortly. Please do not stop to talk to me."

Val passed on, avoiding contact with the women gathered at the wash basins. These were to her "untouchables," although a flash of doubt crossed her mind that she had any sound reason for this instinctive reaction. The lesser women of the Casino de Paris weren't anything like the girls of her set in Terre Haute, either.

She closed the door of her dressing-room and stripped off the cat costume, putting it away in the hatbox she'd fetched it in. Then, removing enough of her stage make-up to pass on the street, she began dressing. She hadn't much more than covered herself in the evening gown she'd worn to the café when someone stopped outside her door.

"It is here, M'sieu," she heard Marthe say, followed by a discreet tap on the door.

Ching! Val's pulse went up a few notches at the thought of seeing him again. It seemed like a pretty long time since she had taken leave of him in the Vichy railroad station.

"What is it?" she called.

"Gentlemen for Mademoiselle," Marthe's voice answered.

Val was certain the woman had made it plural. Her eyes staring at her reflected face in the mirror, narrowed. Not Ching. Fleber, most likely—and the hateful von Stamm. And if Ching came now the plan to keep his presence in Marseilles a secret would be wrecked. For a second she thought to deny the Germans admission, then reconsidered. If she did that, they'd just simply hang around outside her door. It might be a better plan to let them in and dispose of them quickly. She believed she might manage that—and she'd talk loud enough to warn Ching if he came to the door while they were inside.

"Come in," she called.

The door opened and the heavy boots of men sounded on the uncovered floor. Val eyed them in the mirror, relieved somewhat that only von Stamm and Fleber were in sight.

"Now what?" she demanded, turning on the bench in order to glare belligerently at the intruders.

"Congratulations, Fräulein," said von Stamm unctuously. "You have danced exquisitely, as usual—"

"Cut the overture and get into your routine!" Val snapped. "What do you want now?"

Fleber, standing stiffly behind von Stamm, stared at Val, his lips fixed in the usual faint smile. His was a face not easily read, if at all; nothing like that of the more volatile von Stamm.

"I wish to speak to you—seriously," said von Stamm, after a reflective moment.

Val's ears were straining for the sound of another masculine footstep approaching her door, but now she doubted she'd ever distinguish it in the babel of female voices in the corridor. She must get rid of these men quickly and by any means that offered. They must not be here when Ching came.

"I do not wish to speak with you at all," she said, quite loudly for her. "I want to finish dressing and go home. I am very tired."

"The matter is urgent," argued von Stamm.

"Urgent to you!" returned Val. "Go away—both of you. If you can't sleep until you've eased your conscience, come to my hotel in an hour. I'll give you fifteen minutes then, but not

now. Scat!"

"Perhaps this would be better, Colonel," Fleber offered. "The Fraülein will then be less nervous from the strain of her performance."

The colonel considered. Then, gruffly, as though conferring a reluctant favor, "Very well, Fräulein. I shall be at your hotel within an hour. There will be no tricks, please—no running away, or avoiding this appointment!"

His authoritative tone annoyed the dancer. Val, ordinarily feeling no particular animus toward Germans, had begun to resent their domineering manners and insufferable superiority, now that she was receiving a personal application of it. She flared with resentment.

"Oh, you poor, deluded, fatheaded cabbage!" she exploded. "I've said to come to my hotel within an hour, but I haven't given you any right to dictate what I do. You have lived in America—you should know about how far that line will take you!"

Von Stamm's face colored and his eyes went cold. He bowed stiffly—as, in fact, he did everything else. "Very well, then. I shall present myself at your hotel in that time. You will do well to remember that we are now in Europe—not America—and conduct is not here on so loose a pattern."

He turned and strode from the room, a gesture somewhat marred by the cubicle's lack of space. He was clear of the room and in the corridor before he had taken more than three steps, with Fleber following. The corporal shot a quizzical side glance at Val as he left, but the girl had swung around to face the mirror and didn't catch it.

She listened to their retreating footsteps until they faded into the noise outside her room, then raised her elbows to the dressing-shelf, rested her forehead on her palms, and sighed. She was rid of them for an hour, she thought. Now if Ching would come! She began to touch up her make-up mechanically and then to make the minor adjustments to her gown which a woman seems to do without really thinking about it.

After a little an elderly Frenchman with old-fashioned mannerisms came to the dressing-room with Val's money and a receipt, which she signed without counting the packet of francs

—a clear breach of the proprieties in France at any time, and the old fellow seemed to regard it so. As he bowed out Val caught sight of another figure in the doorway beyond him and choked back the impulse to give it a name.

"May I come in?" Ching asked politely.

"Why not?"

He entered the cell and closed the door behind him. "Hi, comrade!"

"Comrade, me eye!" retorted Val. "I'm turning in my resignation—just waiting for you to come and take it."

"Resignation?"

"That's it. Trust baby to put down the pot before she gets her fingers burned."

"Running out on me again?" His smile faded, to return quickly. "No."

"Yes. All I agreed to was to bring that damned book to Marseilles. I'm not sure I succeeded in that—not all the way, anyhow—but it's here. I've been having a time ever since leaving Vichy—a time, mister! Not what I want. I'll tell you where it is, and then I'm flying a kite for Lisbon. I'll be looking for you there."

"You've got panic."

"Yes, sir—like a little bunny-rabbit with a hound dog loose in the yard!"

Ching laughed and came to sit on the bench at Val's side. She turned her head to watch his eyes, which always told her more than his words did. Her lips parted in an eager smile and he answered with a twinkle in the corners of his mouth, flooding her with a potent yearning for him which laid her defenses in ruins.

"Sorry, pigeon," he said, mindful of her grave eyes. "I mean, I'm sorry to have landed you in such a messy business. I had the way out planned, though."

"You could tell me about that."

He didn't seem to be thinking of it, though. "Val, here's something that's been crowding into my mind since I saw you. You know, I love you."

"What's been getting into your mind?" Val frowned, thinking he'd changed the subject to one which she liked but wasn't

solving anything.

"What I just said—I love you." Ching's expression was much as though he'd solved an obtuse problem. "I'd always supposed I did, then all of a sudden I *knew* it."

"You're so roman-ti-cal!" Val laughed. Ching was a clumsy lovemaker, but, after all, wasn't that the sort of fellow for whom girls fell hardest? "Kiss me, passion!"

Ching did, and thoroughly. For once his eyes remained steadfast and his attention to the situation in hand. No dawning and disconcerting light of a new and divergent thought. Finally he shut his eyes and, holding her so close it hurt, kissed her again. This one brought a sensation which started in her toes and didn't stop anywhere. "Hungry for you—" he muttered.

She bit his ear. "You've been taking lessons!" she accused, struggling away from his embrace. "Who's the woman that's been showing you around?"

"I thought it all up myself," he grinned, reaching for her again.

She resisted. This sort of business should be partaken of in moderation, lest it lose its kick. Love's like liquor, anyway, she thought fleetingly: the more you drink of it the less the exhilaration. But he was determined, and successful, too. When she got free again, she turned to the mirror, repairing the damage to her lips with fingers which seemed to have lost their skill, palsied with something definitely not age. "The way out," she said, thickly. "You said you had a way out planned."

"That's right, I did." Ching got up from the bench and took a turn about the cell, which now seemed to interest him momentarily. "Nice little place you have here."

"Charming, isn't it? What's the plan?" She glanced over her shoulder at him, her composure returning slowly. "You know —the way out."

He came back to the bench, standing behind her, looking down at her mirrored eyes. "My friends here have located a boat. It is out at Madrague. Not a very large one, but good enough to take us to Cette and from there to the Spanish coast. It's a fishing boat."

"I don't care for fish," commented Val irrelevantly. She'd had a mess of it for dinner, that conglomeration native to Mar-

seilles called *bouillabaisse*. She wasn't ever going to eat fish again if she could avoid it.

"We weren't going to fish. We'll just go and go until we get to Spain. The boat can't make it in one shot—so we'll have to gas up at Cette. The boys will see to it that gas will be available there. The boat will be ready in a couple of days."

Val considered this. She didn't like boats that were smaller than Atlantic liners. Ching did. He was always talking about the ones he'd like to own. Once he'd been a member of a crew aboard a fifty-foot yawl that finished third in a transatlantic race. Why anyone would want to cross the Atlantic in a cockleshell when large ships were available seemed a little ridiculous to Val. Okay—let Ching fishboat to Spain. She'd meet him in Lisbon.

"All right, then," he assented reluctantly. "I'll be worried about you, though."

"Nothing will happen to me," she said confidently. "It's you who will be taking risks. I'll not be able to sleep a wink until I know you're safe somewhere. How about the book—it's a prayerbook now."

"I heard about that. Could you bring it down here tomorrow night? With safety, I mean? Otherwise I'll make other arrangements."

Val pondered a moment. "I think so—although they watch me like hawks. By now they think I haven't got it. They're watching me in order to find you."

"And I'm lying doggo until I get ready to leave. They won't find me."

"Don't be too sure, darling. You be careful."

Val told him about the visit of the two Germans to her dressing-room and of her worry lest Ching show up before she got rid of them. This reminded her that she had a date with von Stamm at her hotel and had better be getting on with her preparations for leaving. Ching leaned over and kissed her again—this time with more restraint.

"Now that I've found out what it really means to be in love with you, pigeon, it's—devastating!"

Val's heart swelled happily. "It's been nice seeing you again!" she equivocated.

Chapter Thirteen: A GESTAPO ERROR

THE ELEVATOR came to a stop at the third floor and discharged a short, rather stout man wearing a Glenplaid suit and a black derby hat. A cigarette clung perilously to a thick, sulkily protruding lower lip. His rounded face wasn't too pleasing, and eyes of a washed-out blue seemed furtive and wary.

He came down the hall, looking at the numbers over the doors until he reached seventeen, where he stopped and tapped lightly on the wooden panel. Then he turned to glance up and down the hall, his gaze coming to rest uninterestedly on the huge bowl containing the artificial plant at the street end of the hall near the stairs.

The lock clicked and the door swung in some six or seven inches, revealing the frowning countenance of Lotus Nedry. Recognizing and apparently expecting the caller, she opened the door to admit him. "You've been long enough, Jurg," she complained. "Did you get it?"

"Sure I got it." He extended his hand and dropped a key into hers. "It wasn't so easy, either. Snaring a key from the rack in this hotel is a job for a trained thief—not an amateur!"

"You're not even an amateur thief, Jurg!" she protested. "You just borrowed it, say."

"We'll drop the subject," he retorted grimly. "And make sure you leave it sticking in the door, so that it will look as though Valerie forgot to take it with her."

"Right! And you, little man—you scram downstairs to give me notice if she gets back before we expect her."

"I hope the thing is worth all this trouble."

Nedry eyed him curiously. "Well, Jurg, if it wasn't, the Gestapo wouldn't have intimated to me they would pay well if someone got it for them."

Without comment, Jurg Sampson turned and left the room.

Nedry waited until she heard the elevator going down again, then came out into the hall. After a quick survey of the now deserted corridor, she ran lightly past several closed doors and halted before one nearer the stairway. Inserting the key Sampson had given her, she unlocked and opened the door, peeked

in, then pushed it wide and entered, closing it behind her—and leaving the key in the lock.

This was Valerie Bright's room. For a moment Nedry stood just inside the door and carefully scrutinized the interior. Val's trunk, open, stood against a wall, and through the railing which separated the bed from the rest of the room she could see a suitcase.

She moved swiftly to the trunk and began opening drawers. Delving deeply into them, one after another, she was unmindful of scattering some of the contents on the carpet. Always there was the expression of listening on her excited face.

There was nothing in the trunk to seize her interest. After a baffled moment, she moved away toward the bureau in the raised part of the room containing the bed. She didn't find much in the drawers, but managed to leave this little in a completely disordered condition before she tackled the suitcase. Her expression faded from excitement to scowling disappointment as she searched.

She jerked to an upright position with the abruptness of someone hearing an enemy shot and her startled eyes sought instinctively for a hiding-place. Someone was at the door, but having a little trouble with it. First had come the sound of the key being turned, then the trial of the knob and the sound of the bolt again as the newcomer realized the door hadn't been locked in the first place.

There hadn't been time during this for Nedry to find a place of concealment, nor did she want one as she quickly realized subsequent discovery was inevitable anyway if this was Val returning.

The intruder wasn't anyone Nedry had ever seen before, but a short, stocky man, black-haired and gray-eyed, heavy features suggesting Bavarian ancestry. He took a few steps into the room after closing the door, and then saw Nedry beyond the railing, staring at him with mixed emotions of relief that it wasn't Val and uncertainty of what to expect from this fellow.

"What do you want?" she snapped, her throat loosening up. "Who are you?"

"Who I am I do not say. What I want is a book which you have." The man's eyes wandered over her rounded figure and

he pursed his lips as he concluded the words.

"Why don't you go to a library?" Nedry demanded, in a feeble effort to lighten the situation. "I have no book for you."

"*Nein?* I will make sure of that."

"Help yourself."

Nedry sat down on the edge of the bed to watch him nervously as he walked to the open trunk and began pulling out the drawers she had just examined. He wasn't as orderly about it even as she had been, simply jerking them out and emptying the contents on the floor. Finding nothing in the trunk of interest to him, he came to the raised part of the room and began work on the bureau.

The newswoman began to feel uneasy at the way his gaze kept returning to her, slyly appreciative of her figure. Time was passing, too, and she didn't want to be caught here by the rightful occupant of the room—or anyone else.

"This is about enough of such nonsense!" she exclaimed. "If you do not go at once, I shall call the desk and tell them there is a thief in my room."

"You will not call the desk—and if you did it would be the foolish thing," he replied, unmoved and going on with his search. He stopped after a moment of silence and glared at her fiercely. "I am Gestapo!"

Nedry's eyebrows looped up in synthetic surprise.

"I haven't an idea of what you are hunting for, bloodhound, but by all means look." Now there was amusement creeping into her eyes. This fool could take all the blame for the disordered room, if Val wanted to complain about it. As for herself, she had about reached the conclusion the item she wanted wasn't hidden in this room. "Stupid little pig, aren't you?" she taunted.

He shot a cold look at her from under his shaggy eyebrows. "Mind your tongue, Fräulein!" he gurgled.

"Woof-woof!" returned Nedry, getting playful. If Val came now, she would coolly insist that she had discovered this man sneaking into the room and followed him.

The Gestapo agent went on with his search, at first undisturbed by her running patter of insults, but as he didn't turn up what he hunted for, his temper showed signs of becoming frayed. Abruptly he abandoned the search and crossed over to

where she still sat on the edge of the bed. "You will find me the book!" he ordered.

"I haven't the faintest notion what you're looking for," she sneered. "What have you lost—your copy of *Mein Kampf?*"

"If you do not obey me, I will show you what joking is." His tone was ominous, but wasted on the newswoman. She merely leaned back, crossing one leg over the other and clasping her hands about one silken knee. "The book—*macht schnell!*"

"Oh, dry up—and get out before I phone your owner to come for his dog—"

His eyes blazed with fury and he grasped her wrists, pulling her to her feet and close against his pudgy frame. The touch of her skin, the faint but heady scent she used, combined to shift the course of his intentions. He rocked for a moment, holding her wrists tightly, while staring at her with a changing expression in his steel-gray eyes. "I am Herman," he muttered thickly.

Nedry tried to free her wrists, without success. "I don't care who you are, you'd better turn me loose!" she snarled.

The German seemed to be catching up mentally with his revised plans. Obviously he was attempting to twist his studied ruthlessness to present needs and it wasn't bending very easily.

"When you give to me the *tagebuch.*"

"I tell you I haven't any damned book to give you!" shouted Nedry, not caring now who heard her, even hoping someone would. She didn't like the purposeful gleam that was coming into the man's eyes. She'd seen it before in other men's eyes and knew what it portended.

He jerked her against him, releasing her wrists, but encircling her with arms she knew she couldn't escape. She struggled anyhow, but he held her close, uttering a guttural sound that might have been intended for a laugh. His big hands traveled up and down her back, finding pleasure in its soft smoothness. "I have the warning given you!" he exclaimed.

Nedry felt the hand gripping the back of her dress between the shoulder blades, then there was an appalling ripping sound as a goodly part of the material came away in his hand. The chill she felt, though, didn't originate from the cold air of the room striking her bared shoulders. Her assailant laughed harshly—nervously. This was something more than she had

bargained for.

Overly lusty men unprogressed beyond the Neanderthal conception of proper wooing were something not included in Nedry's previous experience, however well she'd parried the ones subscribing to a more moderate version in current practice. She didn't know what to do, and lacked the strength to do it if she had. Clearly, though, something must be done before the other hand pressing against her back ripped out another section of her frock. More from instinct than plan, her hand came up and dragged pointed fingernails across his face.

"Ach!" he exclaimed, releasing her and taking a step backward. The womanly art of self-defense was something Herman hadn't encountered before, apparently, and needed a bit of consideration. He clapped a hand to his lacerated cheek, staring at the woman balefully.

Freed, Nedry sought to escape before the agent returned to the attack, as he obviously intended. She started across the bed on hands and knees, a tactical blunder of the first water, as it developed. Seeing his intended victim escaping, Herman leaped after her, grabbing an ankle which had been admired in practically all of the capitals of Europe at one time or another.

Nedry jerked to free herself, but didn't better her position. Off balance, the German came toppling over onto the bed, still clinging firmly to the ankle. It was a good, stout bed, well designed for stress, or it would have instantly collapsed. Desperately Nedry kicked out with the free foot, without any specific aim, but chance directed the slender heel of her slipper into the man's midriff. Air belched out of him as from a badly cut tire, but his determination held.

Nedry found herself once more tight in his embrace, struggling and battling against superior weight and force, with the sinking feeling that this was a struggle she had no chance of winning. She considered the idea of a loud shriek for help, a little deterred by the prospect of her embarrassment when and if succored. The situation might be difficult to explain, particularly as it was not her own room in which she was defending her honor as she'd never felt constrained to defend it before.

Nevertheless, unless she was going down to insufferable defeat, she'd better get on with the shrieking. Already the dress

she'd paid a thousand francs for in Paris had been reduced to a condition where it wouldn't bring a plugged centime. She cut loose.

The results were favorable. Not that the German desisted for a moment in his work of proving himself a privileged member of the master race; that is, not until the door flew open to admit a very much astonished Colonel von Stamm and mildly surprised Fleber at his heels.

"What have we here?" demanded von Stamm, marching to the railing and resting his elbows on it while he glared at the spectacle on he bed. It looked like an illustration from an old copy of *La Vie Parisienne*. "What kind of business is going on here?"

"It's not a business!" objected Nedry wrathfully. She wiggled away from the Gestapo agent, who was blinking stupidly at the newcomers, facing a situation he hadn't planned for and at a loss what to do about it. "This Gestapo nitwit thinks he's a storm trooper, too. Take him away!"

"Who are you?" growled von Stamm, eyeing the man on the bed coldly. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I am Herman Schlegel," the man answered. A thought seemed to occur to him then. "This woman, this *Amerikanisch* Fräulein Bright—she does not matter so much."

"Bright!" Nedry's eyes opened wider. So this brute had been manhandling her under the impression she was the dancer who occupied the room. As if it weren't bad enough for a woman to defend herself under her own name—"You damned fool, I am not Valerie Bright!"

"Not—Bright?" Schlegel eyed her dubiously, shifting his gaze to the palm of his hand as he took it from his bloody cheek.

"Definitely not bright—this time," commented Fleber, glancing amusedly at Nedry. "Else you shouldn't have been caught in a room where you do not belong."

"That sounds funny, coming from you," retorted Nedry. She went to the bureau to examine the wreck of her costume, twisting before the mirror to see how much was left of the back.

Footsteps pattered in the corridor, paused momentarily, and then came on. Val entered, halting to stare with bewildered surprise at the group around her bed. They returned her gaze,

all but the Gestapo man, occupied in getting up.

"Nice to have a few friends in occasionally," observed Val caustically, as none of them spoke. "Especially the kind who make themselves at home."

"Let me apologize." Fleber, the only composed member of the group, took a step toward the dancer. "When we arrived we found this scene well in progress and the lady shrieking most efficiently. Colonel von Stamm was very much surprised and outraged—"

"*He* was!" interrupted Nedry bitterly. "What do you mean *he* was outraged and surprised? I thought I was the main event in this circus."

"Fortunately, we arrived in the very nick of time, Miss Bright. Otherwise—"

"Luckily for me—not her!" snapped Nedry. Her eyes lighted up as she saw beyond Val another figure entering the room cautiously—Jurg Sampson, considerably agitated.

"What's going on?" he inquired, uneasily.

"Charades—maybe," hazarded Val. "You know—'Little Red Ridinghood and the Wolf.' Nedry's being grandma, or perhaps I've got it wrong—"

"Look!" snarled the exasperated Nedry. "Go out in the hall and see if there's anyone else waiting to come in. We might as well just do the explaining once—for everybody. And you don't have to look at me like a spinster who's wandered into the wrong bathroom, either, Valerie Bright. This could have happened to you. It would have, if you'd been here instead of me."

"What *were* you doing in my room?" Val asked, apparently with mild interest. She looked around at her scattered belongings. "From appearances, you've been quite busy."

"I didn't do that!" flamed the newswoman. "That lousy German tramp did that. I was coming in from dinner and I noticed your key sticking in the lock. I thought you were home—earlier than you expected—so I stopped in to ask how the act went."

"You didn't go to your room first?" asked Val, still looking around the room.

"No. I came right in here—and that man grabbed me!"

"Then where's your purse, Nedry—and your coat. Don't tell

me you went out in a thin dress like that in this weather."

Nedry stared silently at Val for a moment, then bit her lip, glanced at her torn garments and started for the door.

"Wait, Lotus!" called Sampson, moving after her. She didn't wait, and he trotted into the hall after her.

Val turned to von Stamm, waved a slim hand toward Schlegel, now patting his face with a handkerchief and displaying no interest at all in any of this. "One of yours?" she asked. "Can't a girl go out to earn a few honest francs without the German army making a wreck of her room?"

"I do not know this fellow." The colonel eyed the Gestapo agent with distaste. "Who are you, *dummkopf?*"

"I have said that already—Herman Schlegel. I am Gestapo."

"Gestapo?" A hint of worry came into von Stamm's eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"It is not for you to ask questions of the Gestapo," resisted the man stubbornly. "Also, you do not give the orders."

"I will give you an order which you will obey, Schlegel!" exploded von Stamm. "And one minute to do it in. *Get out!*"

Schlegel stared at von Stamm with sullen defiance, but this began to wilt as a silent minute passed. Then with the nervous eyes of a dog caught in a willful breach of his training, he strode heavily from the room.

The colonel turned to Val, posed like a shop-window mannequin by the trunk and looking at the articles strewn on the carpet. He pulled the handkerchief from his breast pocket and rubbed it between his palms as if to dry them.

"Every little thing I have in the world," Val said ruefully, "and scattered around on the floor like so much junk!"

She stooped suddenly and picked up a small porcelain cat. There were quite a few of these, of varying shapes and sizes. People had sent them to her during the time when she was featuring the Jungle Cat number and they were treasured all out of proportion to their intrinsic worth.

"I beg you to believe that this is none of my doing," von Stamm said, apologetically.

"Oh, of course it isn't," replied Val. "You do these things so much more neatly. When you got through with my bags on the train one would never have known they'd been ransacked."

The colonel winced slightly, but he avoided this issue. He was going to be smooth and diplomatic now, no matter what it did to his pride. He picked up a couple of the china cats and laid them on a table carefully, studiously considering a phrase to bring his purpose to the fore. Fleber, across the room by the railing, watched him curiously, unhelpfully.

"I have a proposal to make to you, Fräulein Bright," von Stamm began, a trifle awkwardly. "One which I think will be to your advantage."

"Shoot!" said Val, gathering up more of the cats.

"I remember that on the train you spoke of being a practical young woman—a realist."

"Did I?" returned Val absently, but wondering what he was leading into. "Sometimes I am."

The colonel nodded smartly. "It is quite correct for a young woman to watch out for herself in these days. Now"—he emphasized the word as though all that had gone before was satisfactorily disposed of—"now we come to the matter of my presence here."

"It's been a long time coming, too," observed Val, straightening up with a pair of slippers to dispose of. She turned them over mechanically to inspect the soles and heel-taps.

"I am here to discuss the matter of my father's—ah—lost diary."

"Oh, *that*—again?" Val glanced around from the trunk, with an expression of indifferent surprise. Then she allowed her gaze to drift over the disordered room. "Is that the reason my things have been thrown around like this? Is that what that Gestapo fellow was doing in my room, until he—fell in love with Miss Nedry?"

"I have no question he was looking for the diary, which he evidently believes you have," answered von Stamm grimly. "It is contrary to my plans that his organization find it. Before tonight I did not know the Gestapo knew of the *tagebuch*."

"What on earth do they want with it?" asked Val, and then became uneasy that she might be working the naïveté too hard. "Well, anyway—if it makes you feel any better—he didn't find it. I should think that after searching my baggage and watching me like a hawk, you'd know by now that I haven't got the

damned thing."

"Only a very stupid person would pack such an item in baggage," observed von Stamm, stiffly. "I do not regard you as stupid, Fräulein."

"Thanks, pal. I'm only stupid when I ride on trains, eh?"

"It is my thought now that you have managed in some way to give the book to your lover, this correspondent Dillon who meddles in much that he would do well to avoid."

"Then why don't you look up the correspondent Dillon?"

Von Stamm smiled coldly. "Because we do not know where he is." He stared for a moment, then snapped, "You do! We believe that he is also in Marseilles."

Val shrugged. "Could be. It's a big town—people coming and going all the time."

"You know where he is."

"So what? If I do?" Val walked over and began gathering up the things from the small rug in front of the bureau beyond the railing. "If I knew where he was, and he's my lover, and all—do you think I'd be likely to say where he was? Don't you rather think if you asked me, I'd be quite likely to tell you to go to hell?"

Von Stamm had followed her as far as the railing, where he paused with a quick side glance at Fleber, who was still standing there. "I have not asked that question," he said. "What I have to say is this: It is my purpose to see that this diary is returned to my father, for the simple reason that it contains information which would be disastrous to him if it falls into improper hands. This includes the Gestapo." He frowned, rubbing his fingers across the thinning hair over his forehead, and seemed to be reviewing a new thought. "I cannot imagine how they have learned of it."

"I can," interjected Fleber.

Von Stamm ignored him and continued: "I have said that you are a practical young woman, Fräulein Bright. I have come here tonight to offer you one thousand American dollars for the return of the diary. Further, I will guarantee a safe passage for you and this Dillon to the Portuguese frontier."

A thousand American dollars is a lot of money anywhere, reflected Val. A thousand dollars' worth of diary in the sand

under the plain out in the hall!

"Mr. Dillon does not have the book," she said slowly. "And as you should be convinced by now, it isn't here either."

"But you could—find it," suggested von Stamm.

"Perhaps. I'm not sure."

She was thinking deeply and not unfavorably of his offer. If the surrender of the diary would purchase safety for herself and Ching to the Portuguese frontier, it might be worth parting with it. The obstacle, of course, was Ching, who mightn't think so. She decided she needed time. Besides this, she wanted a lot more assurance than she could feel from merely the German officer's word.

"I guess, before we go making any deals, I'd better see whether I'm able to carry out my end," she said slowly. She stood before the bureau, looking at the reflection of Fleber and drumming her tapering fingers on the surface in an unconscious bit of her hand-dancing. "I'm not at all sure that I can."

"How soon can you make certain of it?"

"I haven't said I would—yet." She turned her back to the mirror abruptly, leaning against the bureau and meeting his gaze levelly. "That also depends."

"On what?"

"I'm pretty sick of being annoyed by you, and I don't like having your man there tagging around after me wherever I go. I don't for a minute trust you, Colonel von Stamm, to do anything you agree to. If you want to know, I don't believe a Nazi exists who isn't also a liar, a thief, and a treacherous lunatic!"

The German's eyes blazed with quick fury and he took a threatening step toward Val. She didn't move, standing quietly and eyeing him with an expression of entire distaste. What she felt was something else—her little feet urged precipitate retreat! "You—are insulting!" he rasped.

"Only a few moments ago you approved of my being a realist," she pointed out. "Just now, I'm working at it. Take it or leave it, mister, that's what I think of Nazis generally, and I have no cause to believe you different from the rest. So you know how I stand. Now"—she imitated his manner of speech of a few moments past—"now, I am promising you nothing at

all, but if I am not interfered with by you between now and late tomorrow afternoon, I will give you a definite answer to what you have suggested. One way or the other."

"At what time?" he asked, after a moment's cogitation.

"Come after four," she answered. "But don't forget—any more of this monkey business"—she waved a hand at the articles still on the floor—"and it's no dice."

"This is not satisfactory to me!" he demurred.

"All right—keep fumbling around and see what it gets you." Val glanced suggestively at her wrist watch. "It's getting late and you'll excuse me now. There's a bit of straightening up to do, and I am tired. Good night!"

Colonel von Stamm looked as though about to make further argument, then apparently realizing its futility, bowed stiffly, turned, and started for the door, followed by Fleber. Val watched them without moving from her position at the bureau.

"Shall I expect you tomorrow—after four?" she called.

The colonel halted to look back at her. "Yes," he growled.

"I'll be left alone—no shadowing, no wrecking my room?"

"I had nothing to do with the condition in which you found this room. But as to the other matters, you will not be given reason for complaint, Fräulein."

He went on out, Fleber closing the door behind them with a backward glance at Val that was only puzzling. She thought she could read faint approval in his eyes, but imagined this might be because he didn't entirely approve of his superior's technique, after the fashion of soldiers in any army. But it might not have been that at all. Corporal Fleber's eyes were the sort to mask innermost thoughts very proficiently.

She moved away from the bureau and began mechanically retrieving and putting away her possessions. Now that she was alone, she discovered herself trembling in every muscle and her heart pounding as she'd never known it to do before.

"Gee!" she murmured. "Am I scared!"

Chapter Fourteen: FRANCO'S CHILD

IT WAS NEARLY NOON before Val slid from her bed the following morning. She'd waked early enough, but there was so much

to think about and bed so good a place to do it in she had just stayed there.

First on the agenda of course was Ching. It now occurred to Val that she had no business to deal with von Stamm without consulting the correspondent. The difficulty raised here was that she didn't expect to see Ching before she went to the Abbaye, while the appointment with von Stamm was at four in the afternoon.

Now she wished she had given herself more time. When she had told the German to come at four, she had been merely deferring her own decision to surrender the diary for the thousand dollars and safe conduct for herself and Ching to Portugal. It had seemed an attractive offer. An unhindered journey to America was all she wanted. But she felt no assurance now that Ching would see things in the same light and he probably would consider she was being high-handed in concluding such an arrangement.

She tried justifying the contemplated action. War was not a business for amateurs, she argued, and the diary wasn't Ching's property, after all, but something stolen from the *Kommandant* in Paris. Stolen goods were stolen goods, no matter what the pretext for taking them. Of course, Nazis weren't bothered by any such scruples, but neither she nor Ching were Nazis. Their deportment wasn't to be excused on the precept that what is right for one is right for anyone.

The argument was fine, but Val realized dimly that she wasn't convincing herself of its soundness. She knew what Ching would say to it: You can't fight barbarism while handicapped with rules barbarians don't abide by.

Summing up, she decided the best thing to do would be to find Ching, some way—and as soon as possible. He might be at the Satyre Noir, but Val didn't think she would be able to find it even if she dared to go alone into the Old Harbor. She finished dressing without any plan having presented itself.

There was no sign of either Fleber or von Stamm in the foyer of the hotel as she left to go to the little café where she'd breakfasted before, but she merely gave the Germans credit for being less obvious. That one or the other was somewhere around and quite aware of her movements she did not doubt.

The waiter recognized her and apparently did his best to serve her something not too impossible. When she had finished, she sat for a little while in rather futile contemplation of what she would do next. If Philippe, the blind musician, had only been somewhere around she would have approached him with her problem.

Leaving the restaurant, she retraced her steps to the hotel, keeping a sharp watch for the German corporal, von Stamm, or any other suspicious looking person along the way, without success. The few people she saw were intent on their own affairs.

In the hotel, however, she encountered von Stamm on his way out. Evidently he had taken up quarters there, as he dropped a key on the desk as he passed toward the entrance. His surprise on seeing Val was obviously genuine, she thought. He stopped abruptly, then bowed. He hadn't taken his hat off, though, Val noticed.

"Good morning, Fräulein Bright," he said, and then seemed to search for something to add to it.

Val acknowledged the greeting frostily, with only the slightest pause, and started on. The German, collecting himself, came along after her, catching up at the desk. "You are not to think that I am not paying strict observance to my agreement of last night," he said. "It is by accident that I have met you just now."

"I suppose so," returned Val, indifferently.

The clerk reached under the counter and brought up a white florist's box, pushing it toward Val. "From the florist, Mademoiselle," he said, turning to get her key from the rack. "It has only this moment arrived."

"Oh, flowers!" exclaimed Val. She picked up the small box, weighed it in her hands, and then, as it seemed quite light—unlikely to contain anything other than what it appeared to enclose—she decided to be bold. If there was a message from Luis on a card, or even from Ching, she'd manage that von Stamm didn't read it. He was still at her elbow. She made a show of naïve excitement in untying the ribbon. "I wonder who could be sending me flowers?"

"Your dancing was splendid last night," observed von Stamm negligently. "I am surprised that there are not more. If my thoughts had not been preoccupied, I should have sent flowers

myself."

I bet you would, thought Val—*with a booby trap cunningly hidden in 'em.* She pulled the cover from the box. It held gardenias, and half concealed in the tissue she saw a card, which she plucked out and held up to read so that the writing wasn't visible to von Stamm. "Pooh!" she exclaimed. "Only Monsieur Legarde—the owner of the Abbaye." She glanced at von Stamm, making her lips into a pout of disappointment, and crushed the card in her hand. "He needn't have gone to the trouble."

"But the flowers are beautiful," said the German. Perhaps thinking he might make some progress by being interested, he leaned over to inhale the scent—a little noisily.

Val replaced the cover, succeeding in dropping the card into the box as she did so and hoping this wasn't observed. It was a natural gesture, anyway, and as long as he hadn't seen what was on the card it wouldn't matter.

The flowers were not from Antoine Legarde, and the message from Luis wouldn't have told von Stamm much if he had read it. Val wasn't sure that the Spanish boy was known to the German, but she was taking no chances. Besides, the message wasn't what might be expected to accompany a gift of gardenias. It read: *The Bourse will close at one. Luis.*

Val retied the ribbon around the box. It didn't require mental gymnastics to ferret out the sender's idea. She was to be at the Bourse at one, and probably Luis or Dulonne would be there to meet her. Something must have happened to change or hasten Ching's plans. Putting the box under her arm, she turned toward the elevator.

"I will come to your room at four," the German said as she started off.

"Or a little while after,"she amended, with a single nod.

He stood watching as she moved away, then strolled toward the hotel entrance and went out to the street.

Val hoped he would be gone when she came back down, which would need to be immediately, as it was almost one o'clock. She went to her room, reopened the box to study and then thoroughly destroy the card by burning it in an ash tray, crushing the ashes into powder. This done, she pinned a gardenia to her coat and returned to the lobby. The clerk eyed her

with friendly curiosity as she gave him her key.

"It is said that an invasion fleet is assembling at Gibraltar," he said, in a tone too low to be overheard. "Perhaps it is—" He arched his eyebrows suggestively, but did not complete the sentence.

"Oh, we hear things like that all the time," returned Val. "I wouldn't get excited about it, Monsieur."

"This—Colonel von Stamm," the clerk said, with a covert glance about the lobby. "He is your friend, perhaps?"

"I am an American. No Nazi is my friend."

The clerk seemed pleased. "*Bon!* I have wondered."

Val did a little wondering herself as she walked to the entrance, partly as to the clerk's sudden interest—he hadn't shown more than professional attention before—but principally about von Stamm. She wasn't concerned now whether he or his aide followed her or not, having developed considerable confidence in her underground friends' ability to throw off pursuit. Their job last night in disposing of Fleber had been neat—and the corporal was no fool!

Nevertheless, she was surprised to discover Luis idling near the corner of the Rue Elizabeth, quite as though sunning himself against the walls of the Bourse was a familiar habit. Val swung around the corner and in a few yards Luis had caught up with her. "Good day, Señorita," he said casually.

Val glanced at him obliquely, with a bit of a smile. Luis was wearing an outfit of the kind affected by French merchant-ship sailors, with a leather-visored cap pulled down over one side of his thin face. He did not return the smile, nor did his dark eyes betray any specific thought.

"I do not speak to sailors," she said, with mock superiority.

"That is well."

Val thought of possible shadows trailing them.

"Are we being followed?" she asked, restraining the impulse to verify this by a backward glance.

"I believe so. It does not matter."

Val looked at him curiously. "Why doesn't it matter?"

"Whoever follows us into the Old Harbor will have other business to attend before he has gone far. It has been arranged."

"Are we going to the Satyre Noir?"

"The Satyre Noir," affirmed the Spanish boy laconically. "Señor Dillon is to be there with the wish to speak with you."

Across the street and a half block behind, Herman Schlegel skulked along close to the buildings, employing the clumsy finesse of an old Broadway buzzard trailing a pretty girl. The Gestapo agent's face was neatly spotted with bits of court plaster. In addition, he wore an expression of marked displeasure. He was still smarting from a short lecture in secret police work from the vitriolic tongue of Captain Tilsen, his superior in charge of operations in the Marseilles district. The captain seemed to believe that such work should be done in secret.

Tilsen hadn't been happy, either, after receiving Schlegel's somewhat expurgated report of the previous night's events. The latter hadn't considered a full report either relevant or helpful, and very likely it would not have been. Captain Tilsen had intended his operations in this affair of the missing diary to be conducted in entire stealthiness, in accordance with hurried instructions from Paris headquarters. Now the cat had become debagged through this *dummkopf's* ineptness.

Schlegel was now striving to remove the blot on his record by still more uninstructed activity. He had hung around across from the entrance to the Rue Limoges all morning, followed Val on her little excusion to the restaurant with hopeful heart, then back to the hotel with dull disappointment.

Now he believed himself on the verge of turning up something useful. Girls like the Fräulein Bright don't pick up with casual sailors—which was a fair commentary on how much the German really knew about women. There are sailors —and sailors!

He clumped along in highly polished boots and a suit which appeared to be at least a size too large for even his bulky figure, keeping a sharp eye on the strolling couple somewhat ahead and on the other side of the street. He regretted that he hadn't been stationed in Marseilles long enough to acquire some familiarity with the streets, particularly as these they were now traversing became narrower, more winding, and definitely unattractive to one raised in a well-kept Bavarian village.

It was becoming increasingly more difficult to keep the couple in sight. Then, just as he saw them turn a corner into a

street some fifty yards ahead, he discovered that he had company, a rather tall Frenchman, from whose face had disappeared the last vestige of kindliness.

Schlegel decided to ignore his companion, who stepped along with him, uncomfortably close. Then he felt a strong hand slip under his arm and powerful fingers close over his wrist.

"Where to, *boche?*" growled the stranger.

Schlegel attempted to wrench his arm free, but wasn't successful. Now, to his surprise, he discovered that he had added to his escort in the person of a shorter but no friendlier looking man on his other side. "Mind your business!" snapped Schlegel furiously. "Take your hands from me!"

"Where to, *boche?*" repeated the tall man, grimly.

Schlegel glanced ahead. Val and Luis were out of sight and he realized that the chance of picking them up again in this bewildering maze was slight. "Let go of me!" he snarled.

He found himself in the center of a growing crowd of Frenchmen who stared at him with unconcealed hostility. Schlegel didn't like it. Recollections of German bodies recovered from canals, ditches, and other lonely places came to his mind with spine-chilling vividness.

"The *boche* is not welcome in the Old Harbor," insisted the Frenchman. His thin lips twisted in a grin which only added to Schlegel's apprehension.

"We Germans do not ask where we shall go!" declared the Gestapo agent, with more courage than he felt.

"A bas les Allemands!" a hard voice called from the crowd.

Schlegel backed against the wall of the building, glancing about with growing alarm. He glanced toward the corner where he had last seen Val and Luis and his expression relaxed a trifle as he saw the uniforms of two gendarmes standing there at the curb. They were watching with interest the excited gathering and Schlegel expected them to intervene, but as he looked they turned and sauntered away around the corner.

The tall Frenchman, now standing in front of the German, suddenly produced a sinister-looking knife. Schlegel's nerves clutched in horror and he stared at the shining blade as one hypnotized. He had a serviceable Luger in his pocket, but in his great fear completely forgot it.

The Frenchman grasped the front of Schlegel's coat in a powerful hand and the German's eyes became as those of a frightened, helpless animal, dumbly facing imminent death. His mind ceased to function, his only consciousness the mere primal instinct of preservation.

But the Frenchman hadn't anything violent in mind. The knife flashed and severed a button from Schlegel's coat, whereupon he released the terrified man. "This I take for a souvenir," he said. "Now, *boche,* it would be better if you alter your direction. If you cannot find your way, there are those among us who will guide you from Old Harbor."

"Slit his throat, Raoul!" suggested the shorter Frenchman.

"No," said Raoul firmly. "Pleasant as it would be to do so, it is not useful. He will go—and not again be seen in these streets—if he would live!"

Schlegel, freed, edged along the wall in the direction he had come, never taking his anxious gaze from the Frenchmen, some of whom moved along with him. Then, as he cleared the fringes of the crowd, he turned and began walking briskly, but still followed. Now he stared fixedly with a horror of fear in the direction he was going, ears keenly attuned to the shuffle of following feet, treading lightly but to him with sinister intent. Reaching the Rue Elizabeth, he slowed down, to discover himself no longer escorted. He stopped, looked back, and dried his perspiring face in a large handkerchief, oblivious of the bits of court plaster peeling off, then continued slowly to the Cannebière. For the first time in his life he felt a twinge of doubt in the Nazi creed of superiority.

There were other patrons gathered in Le Satyre Noir when Val with Luis entered by way of the triangular court. She was mildly surprised, as for some reason she had expected to find it deserted as it had been the evening before.

Six or seven men and a woman formed several groups at different tables and to judge from appearances not the sort to quibble at means to a desired result. The woman, Val believed, was the same who had given her the re-bound diary at the Cathedral. All of them had curious, inquiring glances for the entering couple, losing interest as they saw and recognized Luis.

One of the men hardly interrupted what he was saying and Val caught a couple of his phrases as she and the Spanish boy advanced into the room: ". . . and Giraud has gone . . . hundreds of ships and landing barges . . ."

Luis did not stop, but crossed the room to a narrow door, making a covert sign to the billikin-like proprietor perched on his high stool back of the bar and blinking owlishly at them. Val saw him thrust a hand under the bar, then she heard a faint click and Luis pushed the door open.

They were now in a dimly lighted, narrow hall, containing the scent of ancient dust and a rickety flight of stairs to the upper floors. Luis touched Val's arm and silently led the way up. The girl wasn't sure whether his cautious tread was because of the uneven steps or desire not to be overheard. She decided that if it was the latter, it was sheer wasted effort. They went up two flights, the stairs groaning at every step, and then into a surprisingly large room overlooking the triangular plot below by means of a single narrow window.

There was not much furniture in the room. A cot made of iron pipe and springs stood near one wall, with a pair of rumpled coarse blankets on it. A stool at the side of this supported a half-burned candle stuck into the neck of a bottle. At the window was a wooden table, a deck of cards arranged on its top as though someone had been playing solitaire. Two kitchen chairs were drawn up at the table and a third had been pushed against the wall near by. The air was heavy with the odor of mold, even though the window was wide open.

"Cheery little place," observed Val, looking around, her nose quivering like a cat's sniffing at some unfamiliar object.

"Shall I get some wine?"

"Not for me, but if you want some—"

Luis did, and returned to the hall, where Val heard him shouting down the stair well. He returned, stopping inside the door and regarding Val with dark, somber eyes.

"This is a poor place for such a one as you, but for the moment it is the palace of Señor Dillon," he explained gravely. He came over to Val. "Will the Señorita sit down? It may be a little while before Señor Dillon will come."

"Where is he now?" Val, showing repugnance at the grimy

chair seat, nevertheless sat down.

"He has gone to Madrague with Señor Dulonne," replied Luis, sitting in the opposite chair and resting his elbows on the table. "About the boat."

"I have an engagement at four," said Val, glancing at her watch. It was not yet two o'clock.

"Señor Dillon will arrive before that. It was his plan for you to be brought here before two."

A sallow-looking boy came in with a bottle of wine in one hand and two glasses in the other. He placed the glasses on the table, brushing away some of the cards as he did so. His Gallic mind easily decided that a man and an attractive girl have no need for cards to entertain them. He walked out, whistling softly a bit from some old light opera.

"He takes misfortune bravely," observed Luis, who had watched the boy intently. "Only last week his father and brother were shot by the Nazi pigs as hostages. In Péronne."

Val shuddered, partly at what Luis had said, but more at the dispassionate quality of his voice. She glanced at him sharply. He never seemed moved by any exterior matter, if by anything at all, and yet he was obviously quite young.

"How old are you, Luis?" she asked curiously.

"Seventeen. Perhaps you thought I was older?" He sipped from his glass, but kept on looking at the girl. She nodded. "But old wine may be poured into new bottles."

Seventeen! That was the age of Val's young brother, still at home in Indiana, and since she had not seen him for four years he remained in her thoughts as thirteen.

"I have a brother that age," she said. "And he's still at school. How do you happen to be mixed up in things like this? You are Spanish—and Spain is not at war."

Luis made a gesture of futility with his hand. "There is no Spain. No countries at all—just a world which is very ill." He brooded over this for a woment, staring at Val but as though not seeing her. "I am one of Franco's children."

"You mean—you are—Falangist?"

Val was shocked. It didn't seem possible, in view of his alliance with Ching. Luis's eyes narrowed momentarily, then relaxed into their usual moody quality. "You mistake my mean-

ing, Señorita," he replied. "I have said it badly. We are Franco's children who have been robbed of our future by him and his butchers. We survive only to destroy him as he has destroyed us—that is our hope. Our lives have no other goal."

Val was disturbed by the quiet deadliness of his tone, so surely no more than a thin cover for the cauldron of hate that boiled within. Luis lifted his chin from his hands and reached out to push a card about the table with the tip of a forefinger, watching it abstractedly. Suddenly his met hers. "This is something which is not real for you, Señorita. The terrible things of war, the misery and destruction, are as something in a book. Or as if you sat in the cinema and saw them on the screen. For you, it is only theater, and leaves you untouched."

"That isn't so!" exclaimed Val indignantly, stung because she could discern a glimmering of truth in what he charged. "I hate war! And what it does to people!"

"You hate war because it has upset your playthings," Luis replied evenly. "It has scattered your toys on the floor."

A picture of her belongings strewn about her room the previous night came to mind as she considered his accusation. Was this so? Could her attitude toward the war be founded merely on its effect on her personal life?

"I may be wrong," Luis said, after a short silence. "Perhaps you have avoided the reality of war's horror because of the change it would make in you—which you did not want. Without thinking, you have become as the ostrich."

Why did men always think of her in terms of birds, Val wondered deviously. She'd never cared for them particularly. Ching called her pigeon; now his friend referred to her as an ostrich! And that frowzy old Duc de Something in Paris had spoken of her as *"la poulette"*! Only once, however.

She wished Ching would arrive. "Where did you find out so much about war?" she demanded childishly. "Did you go out on a kid adventure, looking for fun?"

"No, Señorita—war came to me. I never had the thought that it could be what you call fun." He stopped, then, coming to a quick decision, went on. "I will tell you what it means when war comes to those who do not welcome it. What I say may not interest you, however."

Val wasn't sure whether she wanted to hear about it or not. Again she wished for Ching. Luis was getting her upset and uneasy, but she could not escape his penetrating gaze as he waited her answer. "Of course it would interest me," she declared, glancing through the window to the forlorn garden below lest her eyes betray her. Luis, she thought, was a very difficult youngster to lie to.

He fished a crumpled pack of cigarettes from the breast pocket of his dark blue shirt, offered it, and then, as she shook her head, lighted one himself, leaving it dangling from the corner of his sensitive mouth as he talked.

"My family, in '36 when it all began, lived in Madrid, where my father taught languages in the university. I was a schoolboy then, with fine dreams of a wonderful future. It is well that I had these dreams, otherwise there would have been nothing. There was also my mother, very soft and sweet, preferring to be bitten by a mosquito than to take its life. And my little sister, Luisa. My small sister—"

His voice trailed away as his lips tightened and his grave eyes seemed to penetrate time and space.

"How nice," observed Val, feeling she should make some comment. "Luis and Luisa. You weren't twins?"

Luis shook his head. "No. Luisa was not more than a baby. She was not ever to be more than that." The boy seemed to force his thoughts past a hard place in the road. "Spain was poor, we were poor, but contented because we were together. It was not enough that Spain had so little—there were those who needed a field to experiment with new toys of war. The bastard Austrian and power-mad Italian. And Spaniards willing to destroy Spain in order to rule over its ruins. These were not many, so they gave the rest of us to be targets for the Nazis and Fascists."

Luis rambled on in a long outline of the tragic betrayal of Spain. Val, knowing little and understanding less of politics, found herself becoming interested in Luis's face. It was a curious one. She had seen a number of Ching's youthful underground friends, but these had all expressed a fanatic hatred for their enemies. Luis did not. The calm of his ascetic face remained fast, but Val sensed that his emotion was no less deadly.

"The drunken beast, Quiepo de Llano, swept up from the south, spreading misery with his brutal hands and belching obscenity from his mouth over the radio. Death was our constant companion and often our only release. Malaga, then Seville! My father, of course, joined the Loyalist army. He knew that the Republic lacked perfection, but also that war is not the way to reach it. My father's cousin, Alvares Deja, held a different view, and joined with Franco. He became a captain, and it was to be these two would meet in battle.

"There was a road beside a winding stream between two hills. Deja, whose enthusiasm exceeded his military skill, sought to bring his force through this road. My father, with greater shrewdness if no more tactical ability, came down upon Deja from the hills and destroyed his detachment almost to the last man. The pity is that the last man escaped—this cousin!

"The next day my father's command was overwhelmed by a heavy force. My father died, then, and Deja discovered who it had been that opposed him. He was an ambitious man, and the defeat made sores on his heart that did not heal. We Spaniards require revenge."

Luis emptied his glass of the dark red wine, then lighted his cigarette before he went on. Val looked out the window in the hope of catching sight of the arriving Ching, but there was no one there save for the sculptured satyr. She resigned herself to listen, and it was going to be hard work, she felt, with her dislike of the subject.

"The war dragged along. With even a little of the help we were entitled to expect, a little fairness from the big powers, we should have destroyed the Falangist uprising. But it was not given us. I joined the Loyalists after I heard of my father's death. This was in '37. Believe me, Señorita, I did not seek for adventure not because I wished to be a soldier, but for the reason that there were no noncombatants in this war.

"My mother and Luisa remained in Madrid until the government was taken to Barcelona, and it was there that I next saw them. We had failed. The government had fallen. At this moment I was many miles from Barcelona, but I made my way there as quickly as possible. I had great fear for my mother and sister when I heard the Francos were about to take the city. I

wanted to get them away, because I knew this cousin, this Deja, now a colonel, had still thoughts of revenge for his defeat at the hands of my father. And he was not one to stop at anything. I arrived in Barcelona in the same afternoon that saw Franco's men marching into the city. I did not know where to find my family. I searched for them desperately, but all was confusion, the air thick with smoke from many fires. One was constantly halted and questioned. Perhaps because I was so young and wore such ragged clothes no one suspected I had been a Loyalist soldier.

"Finally it came to me that there was a relative of my mother who lived in Barcelona. It was a struggle of the memory, but I did recall the name of the street the Señora Moreno lived in. I went there. It was a short and not very fine street, and I believed by inquiring I could find the house. It was coming from this street that I met Colonel Deja marching out with some of his Navarese soldiers. I hid in a doorway until he had passed, then went on in fear of what I should find."

Luis poured more wine into his glass. He seemed no longer conscious of Val's presence. She stared at him, intensely interested, visualizing the shaken waif concealed in a doorway and watching the enemy of his people strutting by. She inhaled swiftly, then sighed, in an effort to lighten the tension she felt closing in on her.

"An old man stood near by, examining the carcass of a slain horse, perhaps with the thought of eating some of its decaying flesh. He directed me to the house of Señora Moreno. This was small and very old. When I came to the door I found it had been smashed. I entered a scene of desolation, first into the parlor, then the dining-room. There was no one in either, so I went on. A broken door opened into a bedroom. It was here that I found my mother. She had been shamefully maltreated, beaten, thrown into a corner of the room, clothed in little but her own blood. I think she must have died in great agony, but it could not have been long in coming. My gentle mother—"

Luis's voice trailed away and Val dared a fleeting glance at his eyes. They had not changed, still held that distant look, an expression she was beginning to comprehend. His lips, though, revealed the suffering that went on in his soul. A boy who had

never really been a boy, she thought, a package of misery left on the world's doorstep by the insuperable arrogance of idiots in power. A young but rapidly growing hate began to invade her emotions.

Luis resumed: "I heard a murmur of pain in the next room and went to see. It was the Señora Moreno, sitting in a chair with her arms hanging at her sides. Both had been broken, and I could see that she was dying from other wounds. She wanted water, so I went looking for the kitchen. I found Luisa."

He stopped, not trusting his trembling lips to speak calmly as he always did, and emptied a glass of wine in a choking swallow. Replacing the glass, he did so with such force as to shatter it. He eyed a small cut in the hand which had held it, staring at the trickle of blood which began to seep out as though fascinated.

"My small sister! Always she had come to Luis to mend her broken playthings. 'Luis—fix,' she used to say. So now I found her, on the floor of the wrecked kitchen, crying a little until she saw me. Then she smiled, smiled as though it took something from her baby strength, and lifted her tiny hands toward me.

" 'Luis, Luis—fix Luisa,' she said, her voice so small that I could hardly hear. There was that in her eyes which said she believed all would now be mended, just as I had made whole her dolls. But there was also blood in her eyes. I gathered her up and took her to the bed in the room where Señora Moreno was dying in a chair. 'Luis will fix Luisa,' she said again as I put her down. She tried to hold my finger in her tiny fist, but hadn't the strength. Señorita, my small sister had been bayoneted!"

Val pressed her hands against her mouth, pushing her lips back hard against her teeth until it hurt. A wilder fury than she had ever experienced swept through her, keener for lack of physical outlet. With this came a sudden contempt for her own airy aloofness from the things which had been going on all around her. Luis *had* been right; she had behaved as though it were no more than theater.

"I did what could be done to make the passing of Señora Moreno less agonizing than sitting upright in a chair, then took Luisa in my arms and went out to find a doctor, if one could be found in fear-maddened Barcelona.

"The Señora had told me a little while I made her more comfortable. Colonel Deja, who had long known of the friendship between her and my mother, had come straight to this house on his arrival in Barcelona with Franco's troops. It was not enough that my father was dead. There was still revenge in his heart to satisfy; he would not rest until he had killed us all. The Señora had tried to resist his entrance, with the result which I could see for myself."

"But—Luisa?" faltered Val. Her voice sounded strange to her.

"Yes. For hours I tramped through the streets, trying this place and that, but there were no doctors. Not for civilians, although there were many for Franco's wounded. Luisa became weaker, a soft, small heap in my arms.

"Toward midnight I realized that Luisa could not endure much longer. I sat down on a curb in the Plaza Cataluña, trying to hold her so gently, tenderly. The street lights were on and I bent over watching her face, dully hoping that someone might come to help us. No one came. Then I thought she was dead, but she opened her eyes again and they had that same confidence, the same faith that her brother would make her whole again. Then she died."

Luis mechanically got out and lighted a cigarette, while Val vaguely marveled at the steadiness of his long hands. The picture she formed of the harried boy sitting on a curb under a street light with the dead child across his lap was going to haunt her for a long time, she knew. Luis began speaking again, his voice lower, harder. "I made a grave for Luisa ten miles from the center of Barcelona, in a little grove of trees that had escaped destruction. The day was breaking when I finished. . . . I promised my sister that one day I would still the heart which beats in a dog named Deja." Val shuddered.

"This promise I have not yet been able to keep. But since that day I have fought against the forces of his master and his master's kind wherever they have come with misery for humble people. In Poland, in Norway, in Belgium and France, first in the armies and then, when we had no more armies, with those who must strike and run. But, in the end, fate will make for me an appointment with Colonel Deja!"

Val suddenly pushed the remaining and unused glass toward

Luis. "Pour me some wine, Luis."

Luis looked at her curiously, then filled the glass from the bottle and pushed it toward her. Val's fingers closed around its base and she lifted it. "I'm drinking to me, I guess," she said, conscious that her voice was playing tricks on her. She lifted wet but defiant eyes to meet his inquiring gaze. "I'm knowing now for the first time that all this isn't just something cooked up by Orson Welles and released by RKO. If it could happen to you in Spain, it could happen to me, or to Ching, or to my people in Terre Haute. With men like Hitler, or Mussolini, loose, this war's everybody's party. So, I'm joining up—and here's to you, brother!"

"Salud!" And now for the first time there was warmth in the Spanish boy's eyes. Lacking a glass, he tilted the bottle against his lips to join her toast. A thin line of blood from the cut on his hand made a crooked river over his wrist and up his forearm.

Then, a little while later, Ching arrived.

Chapter Fifteen: SOME FANCY STALLING

"HAVE YOU CHILDREN been having a fight?" inquired Ching as he came into the room. He lifted his eyebrows at the broken glass and the cut on Luis's hand, shrugged, and then brought the unoccupied chair from its place against the wall.

"The glass broke in my hand," explained Luis. "I think I put it back on the table with too much strength. The cut is nothing."

Ching sat down heavily, as though weary, his keen eyes on Val, who was still drifting in an emotional eddy.

"Get clean glasses, Luis, and a decent bottle of wine—Chablis or Graves, if you can. I can't drink this junk." He tossed the Spanish boy some franc notes, then as Luis left the room he rested on an elbow, his gaze swinging to Val. "How's pigeon?"

"You're late—as usual," complained Val. "Where were you?"

"Madrague. Dulonne went along with me to see about the boat. It will be ready for us day after tomorrow at midnight. The book is still where you put it?"

"That's what I hope."

"Bring it to the Abbaye tonight, then." He scratched his chin

reflectively. "Tomorrow night would do, though. Seems pretty safe where it is."

"With the hotel full of Gestapo and other Germans? I wouldn't be so sure. They turned my room upside down last night looking for it. Or else Nedry did. Did you know she was in town?"

Ching hadn't known. Val gave a brief account of what had happened after her return to the Dijon, with considerable emphasis on the newswoman's part.

"Jurg Sampson came in, too," she concluded, and then went off into a commentary of the event. "Nedry's after the book, of course, and she came out into the open about it last night. Pretty nearly out of her clothes, too. I don't know how she and Jurg got wind of the thing, but it must have been before I left Vichy. She was snooping around even then."

Ching nodded thoughtfully. "There's no doubt of that. Did you get any idea of whom she might be working for?"

"She's working for Nedry—all the time," responded Val. "She has a pretty shrewd idea of what you intend doing with it—getting it published—and wants to cut herself in. Seems if."

"I thought she might have enlisted in the Gestapo—on a fee basis." Ching turned his head quickly as the sound of the returning Luis echoed on the stairs. He kept his attention in that direction until the head and shoulders of the boy came into sight on the stairs, then swung back to Val. "Nedry trades with anyone, you know."

"Could be," admitted Val. "I don't think so, though. She didn't know that Gestapo creature she found in my room."

"You don't know that—or who found whom, either," Ching pointed out. "All you really know is that they were there before von Stamm and Fleber came in. She and the Gestapo mug may have been working together. All right—let it go. We'll say the Gestapo, Nedry, and von Stamm are all working separately toward the same objective. We don't know."

Luis filled glasses from the bottle of wine he'd brought and the conversation lapsed into a recess. Each of the three seemed to be immersed in a bit of private thinking. Val contemplated her engagement at four with Colonel von Stamm.

Exchanging the diary for the safe passage of herself and

Ching to neutral territory had until a little while ago seemed wonderfully attractive—and now it didn't. The thought of herself idling about, impatiently waiting for Europe to end its madness so that she could resume the attractive life she'd had, was now entirely disagreeable. She'd known all along that her attitude hadn't even satisfied herself, that it was a mere reflection of some of her more sophisticated friends in Paris—who had for the most part departed in haste at the German approach. Now she felt that to surrender the diary to von Stamm was a good deal like throwing the children from the sleigh to escape pursuing wolves.

"Ching," she said abruptly. "You said you were sailing day after tomorrow night. Do you still intend putting into Cette?"

"Yes. That can't be avoided, because of the gas situation."

"Could you pick me up there?"

Ching's eyebrows went up in surprise. "You said—very definitely—you wouldn't consider going along. You would meet me in Lisbon."

"That was last night. Since then I've joined up with Luis and your friends—and I'm working on an idea." She drained the glass of wine she'd been toying with in a couple of convulsive swallows. No more of this business of sipping at the rim of things! "Look: I'm trying to work out some way to lead von Stamm, and the Gestapo, and Nedry, too, on a wild goose chase while you are getting away with the book. So far, they don't even know you are in Marseilles, but they think you are. At least, von Stamm does—he said so."

"He's just guessing, of course."

"That's what I believe. So, if I let 'em chase me to Arles, or some place away from here, you can get started without danger. They'll let me alone as soon as they discover they have been tricked into following me and then I'll find some way to join you on the boat. Is that good?"

Ching shook his head. "Not altogether," he demurred. "They will not leave you unwatched until they have the diary. The fact that they know you haven't it won't stop them, because they'll figure by sticking around you'll lead them to me."

Val considered this angle. "Not so good," she concluded. "But, anyway, if you get going meanwhile, you should reach

Spain all right. We'd be ahead that much, and it wouldn't really matter if they followed me all the way to Lisbon."

Ching got up and took a turn about the room, thrusting his hands deep into his trousers pockets (he was wearing an outfit similar to that which Luis wore, topped with a raffish beret) and scowling in concentration at the rough board flooring as he walked. He returned to the table, stopping at Val's side to rest an affectionate hand on her shoulder.

"Val, darling, I couldn't let you do it," he said, just a little huskily. "So far, you haven't seen what these bastards are capable of doing, when balked. You think they'd not bother you when they know you haven't the book. But there isn't any degree of hellishness they wouldn't subject you to before they'd be convinced you weren't useful. I appreciate your willingness, but I won't take that chance."

"Well, what are we going to do, then?" demanded Val shortly. She wanted to settle on something definite.

Ching considered while refilling his wine glass. "You are out of this, pigeon," he said. "Even to the bringing of the book to the Abbaye. There is someone else in the hotel we can trust and we'll give him the job of delivering the book to me—"

"Oh! The clerk—"

Ching's eyes lighted up with quick surprise. "And how did you find that out?"

"Guessed it," Val replied, airily. She felt rather set up at her astuteness in coupling the clerk's interest in the Gibraltar rumors to a more active participation in underground affairs.

"Which one?" demanded Ching. "If you mean the taller one, with a beak of a nose, you're off base. That one is a Laval stooge, if I'm not badly mistaken."

"No—the little one. His name is Albert, I think."

Ching nodded. "Albert is our man," he said.

"How will he know where I've hidden the diary?" Val didn't think there was likely to be a chance for her to instruct him in private.

"He will be informed. And, from now on, you keep out of this! I'll see you tonight at the Abbaye and make arrangements for us to keep in touch after we leave Marseilles. The best thing will be for you to take a plane for Lisbon, if you can, and

if not, go by train. There won't be anything to stop you. Your papers are all in order."

"Colonel von Stamm won't care about my papers."

"We'll keep that Nazi version of a gentleman busy enough so that he'll have no time for you," asserted Ching.

"Which reminds me that I have an appointment with him at four," observed Val, looking at her watch. "And, if this is all we have to say now, I'd better be getting along."

"You have an appointment with von Stamm?"

"Yes. Don't get excited about that, darling. This is something I can handle all right. Whether you like it or not, and if I can swing it, I'm going to try to think up something that will send him off after a herring. A nice smelly one—plenty dead."

"You be careful!" exclaimed Ching, worried again. "Don't take the guy to be a complete sucker. He isn't!"

Val got up, weary of all this sitting. "Listen, Ching, when it comes to handling men, I don't need any lessons from a newspaper lug. I took my training on Broadway, remember. The best school on earth." She laughed, and thought while she was doing it that she hadn't laughed for days. At that, the one she was indulging in now lacked something of spontaneity.

"You needn't be so damned proud of it," objected Ching, also leaving his chair. "Luis will steer you back to the Cannebière. I'm staying here to do a spot of sleeping. This turning out before sun-up is debilitating."

He walked to the stairway with them. Val had an urge to be kissed, but this didn't seem to be what Ching had on his mind. Well, one of these days, if fate was kind and her luck was good, there was just a chance that he would give her a load of full-time attention. Just maybe, though, she reflected as she followed Luis down the rickety stairs. In the hall on the ground floor the Spanish boy did not turn toward the café entrance, but instead went the other way, presently reaching a door which opened directly on the street.

"This is the Rue Chevennes," he said as they stepped down on to a narrow sidewalk. He looked up at a pair of amber-glassed lanterns bracketing the doorway, Val's eyes following his. "Look well at those lamps, Señorita, that you will remember this doorway. And take this key. I think you will not need

it, unless events make it necessary for you to come here alone. Do not try to enter through the café. Now I shall show you the quickest way from the Old Harbor."

As they turned away a man came from a small shop across the street, caught sight of them, and stopped automatically, an expression of surprise and pleasure spreading over his round face. Then his gaze shifted to the old building they had just come from. "I must see Lotus about this," he muttered and walked away rapidly in the other direction.

Val hadn't much more than got out of her coat and hat and made a few deft repairs to her make-up when von Stamm came to her door and rapped. She crossed the room to the door with an odd sense of buoyancy replacing the dread she'd experienced before when facing contact with these Germans. Now that she had abandoned any idea of wriggling out of the whole affair at the first opportunity, she felt a pungent urge to get on with the contest. She glanced at her watch to find that her visitor was arriving practically on the stroke of four.

"You are prompt," she greeted the stocky von Stamm, and glanced over his shoulder at his shadow, the always composed Fleber.

"That is my habit," he answered.

Val stood aside to admit them, intrigued for a moment by the manner of von Stamm's entrance. It had been so obviously intended to impress her with the stern inflexibility of his purpose. He strode to the center of the room, bringing up at a small and fragile table, where he halted to turn and look back at her while drumming the tips of his fingers on the table top. Fleber came in more leisurely and only a few paces before he stopped, assuming an easy posture. Val closed the door and walked past Fleber to the table.

"Will you sit down?" she asked, negligently.

The German considered and decided against it, making a deprecatory gesture with his hand. "It is not necessary, I think," he replied. "What you have to tell me should not take too long."

"Visiting me isn't your idea of pleasure," she accused. "Sorry."

"In other circumstances, it might be."

"Not to me—in any circumstances," Val declared. "I'd never have much in common with anyone who can stomach Hitler's bilge—"

"Fräulein!"

"Sorry—again. There's no need for us to quarrel about it, though. That's just the way I feel toward you and your pals." She flashed a glance at Fleber, but whatever he felt was concealed behind an impassive face. "All right, Colonel, let's get down to brass tacks."

The German's stiff bow was in fractions of an inch.

"Please do so. You have located this *tagebuch* of my father's?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that," equivocated Val, trying to manage a disarming smile. It was completely wasted on von Stamm, with his mind definitely set in another direction. "I have only found out that I may be able to carry out my end of this business. *And* I have not found any reason to suppose that you would carry out yours—or could—if I agree to go on."

A good touch, thought the girl, and might develop some information about any others who might be helping the German, if there were any. She wasn't too hopeful of it, though.

"You are insulting, as usual," he growled. "And there is an end to my patience."

"That sounds familiar, somehow. Where could I have heard it before, I wonder?" Val laughed as though really amused—and it was a well staged act. Before he could make a retort, she grew serious again and continued, bitingly: "All I know about your offer is that there are only two of you. So it strikes me as a pretty large order for you to guarantee safe conduct for me to Lisbon. The Gestapo seems to have some interest in this affair—and there are lots of them. Perhaps I should wait for a proposition from them. There'll be one."

"It is not correct for you to question my word. If I say I shall make sure of your safety to the Portuguese frontier, that is enough."

"It may be enough for you, Colonel, but not for baby. German promises never pay off. You'll have to do better than just your word, I'm afraid."

"It is becoming very difficult for me to keep my temper, Fräulein! You are a very annoying person to deal with."

"I've no taste for fairy tales," replied Val evenly. "My mother didn't let me read 'em. So, as you accused me before, I am a realist. Come on—play your hand. You agree to give me safe passage to Lisbon and a thousand dollars, American, in return for the diary. Does that mean you intend merely to go back to Paris and let me proceed to Portugal unmolested, or do I get actual help from you? You see what I mean, don't you?"

"I consider I have been explicit enough when I said I would guarantee your safe arrival in Lisbon."

"Yes—but what I need to know is what's behind your guarantee? What have you to back it up? As I've pointed out, there seems to be just the two of you here, and there's an awful lot of people between Marseilles and the Portuguese border. Some of them aren't too keen about Mr. Dillon."

"It is true that at the moment there are only Corporal Fleber and myself engaged in this task in Marseilles. But that is not to say there are not a great many others I may call in, if needed." Colonel von Stamm changed his mind without even thinking and sat down abruptly in a chair by the table. This American was not proving to be the giddy-brained female he'd supposed.

Val choked off a rising chuckle at her success in establishing the strength of von Stamm's present force in Marseilles. Now for some fancy stalling until she could work on her plans a little more. "Very well, Colonel. I think you understand I insist on very definite proof, not just words, that if I agree to this there will be no question of my safe arrival. I also have a suggestion."

The colonel eyed her tentatively, and by a flickering glance Val saw that the corporal seemed to display more interest than he usually permitted himself. "Speak."

"Suppose I agree to meet you in Lisbon and hand over this book you're crazy about for the thousand dollars. It will then be to your advantage to make very sure that I arrive in Lisbon without harm."

"How am I to rely on your not tricking me?"

"It is not correct for you to question my word," retorted Val, in a good imitation of his own remonstrance. She added, "If I give it."

"Your word is not enough!"

Nobody believes anybody in this fracas, Val reflected, *and*

that makes us all even. Only, if he believes any promise I make to him is likely to be kept, he's going to roll a seven when he's trying to make eight!

"We seem to be stymied," she said. "Maybe I'd better just grab a plane for Lisbon and forget the whole business."

"You will find it difficult to leave Marseilles by plane or in any other way without my permission!" he flashed incautiously.

"No?" drawled Val. "Okay. There's always the Gestapo to fall back on. They seem to be interested in your daddy's confession book. I'd better look them up—if you're going to turn nasty."

Baffled, and not taking it well, von Stamm got up and walked in a wide circle around the table, returning to but not resuming his seat. "Let us not permit our tempers to control the situation, Fräulein," he said. "Now I see that this is not a matter to be easily settled. You are more than cautious, but I can understand this, even if it is incorrectly based. I will go now, and as soon as I can make some plan agreeable to us both, I will return. That may be tomorrow."

He walked stiffly toward the door, where he stopped to look back at Val, who had left her chair but remained at the side of the table. Fleber went on out into the hall. "Until then, it is understood we will preserve the *status quo?*" von Stamm asked.

"Why not—I'm not the one who's in a hurry," agreed Val. "I suppose, meanwhile, your bloodhound will be hanging around."

"There will be no moment until I see you again that I do not know where you are," he said flatly.

"Has there been?"

"Yes—for a short time this afternoon. I have kept my word of last night with you."

He bowed again, closed the door as he left, and Val heard his heavy footsteps going down the hallway. Then she laughed softly, turning to the bust of the Grecian woman by the windows. "Did you hear that, Chloë, my pet?" she demanded. "A Nazi keep his word. He'll draw a court-martial if it's ever found out, and

. . . sit in solemn silence in a dull dark dock,
In a pestilential prison, with a lifelong lock,

Awaiting the sensation of a short, sharp shock,
From a cheap and chippy chopper on a big black block!"

She executed a funny little dance as she did the bit of patter from *The Mikado,* but since the Grecian lady was of marble, the song and dance left her cold.

Chapter Sixteen: WALLS HAVE TONGUES

THERE WERE SELDOM MANY PEOPLE in the lobby of the Hotel Dijon and when Val returned from an excursion in search of dinner there were fewer than usual. She had got into the habit of keeping a wary lookout for possible German agents as she left or entered the hotel. Tonight, though, aside from a rather mildewed-appearing French couple who seemed to spend most of their waking hours in lobby chairs, there was but one person. This was a tall, gangling man wearing loose clothes and a hat which didn't need *Made in America* stamped in it to prove its origin. He was standing at the desk when Val stopped for her key.

Val shot a curious glance in his direction and discovered he was watching her, masking his interest behind a match which he held to the bowl of an oversized pipe.

"You are American, are you not?" he asked politely, seeing that she'd caught him looking at her. He waved out the flaming match.

"That's right," replied Val. "And I talk to anyone."

He laughed. "Splendid. So am I—from Burmin'um, Alabama."

Val saw that the clerk, having laid her key on the counter, had turned away to busy himself with his books at the other end and seemed to be paying them strict attention. It was not the one called Albert, but the big-nosed one.

"I hardly believe that," she replied to the stranger's statement. "Unless you came away when you were a little boy. The folks down there don't say 'Burmin'um.' Birming*ham.*"

"I've been away for some time." The stranger seemed disturbed.

"You're British, really, aren't you?" she asked. The English hadn't been very popular in France since the debacle of 1940,

and she could understand the man's pretending to be an American. He glanced around as if to assure himself that they weren't being listened to, then nodded.

"I find it more—convenient—to be an American at the moment," he acknowledged in a low tone. "Thanks for the tip. I shall have to select another birthplace—one that I can pronounce more convincingly."

"Better make it Brooklyn. That's fairly standard." Val smiled brightly and began to edge away. She decided she was having excitement enough without adding a masquerading Briton to her collection of liabilities. "Besides, almost anyone can come from Brooklyn."

"Quite," he agreed. "And I've really been there. I say, you're the girl who dances at the Abbaye, aren't you?"

"I did last night, and perhaps will for several more. Under the circumstances, one doesn't plan too far ahead."

"I was thinking of taking you in tonight," he said. "By the way, my name is Darrell—Cedric Darrell."

"Better change the first name, stranger," grinned Val. "Cedrics don't thrive in Brooklyn. I'm Valerie Bright, and I'm glad I met you, and all. Good-by!"

While she was waiting for the elevator she reviewed her impression of the man. His name struck her now as being one properly belonging to an actor, but there wasn't anything of the theater in this fellow's demeanor. Val held to a firm belief that no actor ever wholly succeeds in removing his make-up. Someone should tip off Mr. Darrell about his clothes—the hat was the only truly American item he wore.

She glanced back to where he was still standing at the desk, and frowned slightly. The suit he wore was definitely not of American cut, but that indicated nothing, since she knew he was an Englishman. Or did she? His clothes, although draped in the British fashion, didn't seem to be the work of an English tailor.

Well, it couldn't matter to her, she thought, as the grille slid back and she entered the elevator. Before going on to her room she paused for a quick inspection of the potted plant. The cigarette butts she had arranged had been brushed aside and the sand disturbed. With no question in her mind that the diary had been removed, she went on toward her room, wishing

she had told Ching to have the clerk leave some sort of sign to assure her that it had been he who had taken it.

With her hand on the knob after unlocking the door, Val heard the sound of another door opening farther down. She turned her head in unthinking curiosity and as she did so Lotus Nedry came into the hall, taking two or three steps before she saw Val. Then she halted abruptly and hurried back into the room she had just quitted.

And what is Nedry made up for, wondered Val, not moving for an instant. The newswoman was dressed in a tight black frock, much the worse for wear, topped off with a garish bit of millinery that Val wouldn't have believed Nedry would wear in any circumstances, while her face was made up like that of a low-grade street jezebel.

Val thrilled with curiosity. She wanted to see more of this spectacular shift in Nedry's fastidious clothes sense. Nedry had evidently been headed for somewhere, and with a sly smile Val opened her own door, thrust it wide, and then pulled it back noisily. Then she turned and watched the door to the room into which Nedry had hurriedly backed.

The stratagem worked beautifully. In a moment the door reopened and Nedry walked out, looking back over her shoulder and thus not seeing Val. After her came Jurg Sampson, himself in a raffish outfit. He caught sight of the watching dancer beyond Nedry and emitted a gurgling sound of shocked surprise. Nedry's head snapped around and her eyes gleamed with the outraged expression of someone betrayed.

"My, my!" exclaimed Val. "I see you've been shopping, Nedry." She twisted her head to one side and examined the newswoman's outfit critically. "Snappy little number. Where did you get it? I didn't realize the shops on the Cannebière had anything so—so frou-frou!"

"Oh, dry up!" snarled Nedry, flame burning through her resplendent make-up.

"And the hat!" Val's gay laughter echoed in the long corridor. "There hasn't been such a topper since Floradora! And Jurg, you kill me with that outfit. You really do! Have you gone Apache—both of you?"

"Well, if you have to know," exclaimed Nedry furiously,

"we're going down to that dive to see you dance. I understand that wearing good clothes in a place like that makes one very conspicuous."

"Is that what you think?" Val chuckled at the thought. "You'll be surprised, I think. But I doubt they'll let you back in the hotel when you return. Well—good slumming!"

She watched them as they went down the hall toward the stairs, amused with the thought of Nedry's shocked surprise when she discovered the nature of the Abbaye's clientele. There had been many well-dressed patrons in the café the night before.

Val opened her door and went in, dismissing speculation concerning Sampson and Nedry for the more immediate question of whether or not her belongings had been tampered with again in her absence. Nothing seemed to have been disturbed, and after a short while she began getting ready for her journey to the Abbaye. Legarde had made a point of her arriving in evening dress and entering through the restaurant instead of the side entrance used by the other entertainers. He seemed to regard this as a good build-up for her subsequent performance, as perhaps it was.

Legarde had all of the showman's attention to detail coupled with keen appreciation for publicity. Somewhere he had unearthed an ancient barouche with red wheels and two white horses to pull it, so that Val could be brought to the Abbaye in something befitting her position, as he saw it. Val felt that the only thing missing was a banner across the stern with big red letters announcing *Valerie Bright—Now at the Abbaye*. But she didn't mind particularly; it was better than trying to find some sort of conveyance on her own.

She leaned back under the hooded top over the rear seat and, even from her limited knowlege of the streets of Marseilles, noticed that the driver was taking her to the Abbaye the long way. That didn't matter, as there was time enough, and she supposed that Legarde wished to get full benefit of public curiosity despite the lack of some sort of placard announcing her identity.

The mousy little man driving had steered his horses out the Cours Belsunce and as they approached the Place d'Aix, Val looked up at the Arc de Triomphe silhouetted against the dark sky with idle interest. She wondered just what triumph it repre-

sented, with the added thought that these things were better done back home. There, triumphal arches were usually built of some material not likely to outlast the victory, as these French ones had done.

Val snapped back into the present as the barouche suddenly sagged to the left and another passenger came aboard. Her breath escaped in a sharp gasp as she shrank against the other end of the seat, staring at the intruding man while a chill of helpless fright swept through her.

"Please don't be alarmed," he said quickly, easing himself down to the seat at her side. "It is tiresome work following you on foot. I decided I might just as well ride."

Fleber again. This time, perhaps profiting by his previous experience in being lured into a bootless errand after the strange girl in a light coat, he was taking no chances. He smiled reassuringly.

"Of course," Val assented, relieved. At least it wasn't a fresh menace that had climbed into her carriage. "So stupid of me! I'd quite forgotten you were my shadow."

The *cocher* turned the horses in a wide sweep around the arch into the Boulevard des Dames, toward the new harbor. Fleber, after watching the maneuver for a moment or two, swung his gaze to Val.

"I've had worse jobs in my life than being your shadow," he said. "But, tell me, if you will—have you committed yourself with the Gestapo?"

"Of course not," returned Val. "The only one I've seen was that fellow last night in my room."

There was another period of silence, broken only by the sound of the horses clop-clopping ahead in a very leisurely trot. Val knew that her companion was still watching her intently, but she stared fixedly at the driver's back. She was puzzled. Fleber's silence seemed to indicate that he hadn't believed her last statement. "I wish I could be sure of that," he said.

"Well, I am," she retorted. "There isn't any reason for me to lie to you about it. If I had been seeing anyone from the Gestapo, I'd want Colonel von Stamm to find it out."

"You have not spoken of this diary to anyone you did not know since von Stamm called on you this afternoon?"

"Not to anyone—whether I knew him or not." She turned her head to meet his steady gaze. "Why should I? I certainly don't go around popping off to strangers about it."

Fleber bobbed his head in a single nod of approval.

"I believe you, Miss Bright," he said.

They were passing the Cathedral Marie-Majeure, where Val had regained possession of the topic of his conversation, and she grinned obscurely as she remembered how he had walked and ridden in the tram with her—and all the time the diary had been held under her arm, concealed by her bag!

"Nice to be believed for a change," she retorted.

"No doubt. Now I am going to leave you once more. I don't think my arriving at the Abbaye in your carriage would be appreciated—in some circles." He sat up straight on the edge of the cushion. "There is just one thing more; be very discreet with any strangers you meet."

Val laughed. "You sound like my Aunt Laura. She spent her first forty years in avoiding strange men—and the next ten wishing she hadn't, I think."

"I am not joking," answered the corporal. "There is every chance you will be approached by Gestapo agents here. It will not be well for you to deal with them."

"Says Colonel von Stamm!"

"No. I have not said this in the interest of Colonel von Stamm."

"Whose, then?" Val demanded.

"Yours."

She felt again rather than saw that he was watching her closely. "Oh, thanks," she said hollowly.

"And to some extent, my own," he added after a pause.

"Heil Fleber!" This was about as close to a sneer as Val could achieve without being really worked up.

"Let us omit 'heils,'" he replied evenly. "Good-by now. I am looking forward to your performance tonight."

He got up and dropped off the step of the barouche lightly and disappeared as it went on. The old *cocher* on the box didn't bother to look back to see what had rocked the carriage, while the hood over the rear seat prevented Val's seeing where Fleber had gone.

She wasn't interested in that, anyway, feeling that he intended tagging along on foot for the remaining distance to the café. She mulled over the conversation. "Good-by now," he had said. He hadn't picked up that phrase in Europe, she thought. Another thing: she had been variously addressed as "Mademoiselle," "Fräulein," and "Señorita" in the last few days, but Fleber had been the first European to call her "Miss Bright." Signifying nothing, perhaps.

Consideration of his warning made it appear rather probable that the success of von Stamm's mission was actually what he was working toward, despite his denial and the absurd assertion that he had, in part, her own welfare in mind.

For a German, she concluded, Corporal Fleber was pretty smooth. Most of them weren't, although they usually imagined themselves to be. Having little ability to project themselves into another's thought processes, their attempted suavity lacked finesse. This fellow, though, had developed a technique of his own, a disarming blandness in his speech, and an intriguing trick of never saying all his listener expected. Val decided that puzzling about Fleber wasn't getting her anywhere.

Legarde was waiting for Val in the foyer of the Café Abbaye, hurrying to the street to help her down from the barouche. Entering the café, Val followed the huge proprietor down an aisle between the center tables pretty much in the fashion of an oriental consort trailing after her royal husband. Val felt the performance a bit silly, but Legarde evidently enjoyed it hugely, striding along toward the small door at the side of the stage and smiling thickly right and left in response to a patter of applause. The place was well filled.

Passing through a small door, Legarde led the way to his office. This was in what had originally been a chapter house and not then a part of the main building. The short passage had since been walled in to make it all one.

Making a ceremony of seating Val in his own well-cushioned chair, Legarde got a dusty bottle from a cabinet against the wall and small glasses. "A priceless brandy," he said, coming back to the desk. "Only to be tasted on very great occasions."

"Is this one?" asked Val, wondering how she was going to avoid drinking it. She'd always believed that a great occasion

needed no alcoholic fortification, a theory by no means subscribed to by most of those she knew.

"Great, indeed!" enthused Legarde, pouring carefully from the bottle. "When has the Café Abbaye before yielded its stage to so great an artiste as Mademoiselle Bright?"

"I wouldn't know," she smiled. "Sounds pretty, the way you say it, Monsieur Legarde, but my idea of a truly great artiste would be someone like Pavlowa. And the only thing I have in common with her is that I've never done the can-can either."

Legarde chuckled, turning his head to look at the girl from his fat-concealed eyes. "For me, I would not rather have Pavlowa on my stage," he declared. "Nor would my clients. To you, Mademoiselle—and may your stay at the Abbaye be long."

He downed the brandy after rolling it about on his tongue to get the full advantage of its flavor, then, replacing the glass on the desk, paused as though waiting for Val to follow suit. She had been holding the glass, watching him curiously. The café owner put on quite a show when he drank brandy, even without a sniffer. "You do not drink?"

"Not to myself," answered Val. She smiled, lowering her eyes to the glass in her hand, then flashed them up again and raised it. "But to you, Monsieur—and the Abbaye."

She didn't do much more than taste the liquid. A few shots of it and there'd be new and unplanned steps in her Jungle Cat number. Legarde came around the desk, stopping to stand a moment in silence, looking down at her. "Have you made a decision of how long you will remain in Marseilles?" he asked.

"No more than I told you—I want to get away as soon as possible."

"But I could make my offer better, if you remain. Now that my hopes of your reception have been justified."

Val shook her head. "I want to go home," she said. "I think it will be a long time before anyone can make plans in Europe and expect to see them come out right. Life here is on a day-to-day basis—and I don't like it."

"There will be no change in Marseilles," Legarde assured her with conviction. "It is true, of course, that you are an American and your country at war with Germany, but you will not be disturbed in this part of France."

"Oh, no?" Val was about to argue this theory, deciding not to after a quick thought. Legarde was already much too curious about her real reasons for being in Marseilles. "Well, I prefer to keep on with our present arrangement and let the future wait on events."

Legarde abandoned his proposal with an air of having said his piece and realizing the futility of arguing about it. Val had a sneaking thought that the whole conversation had been more of a plug for the man's ego than from any real desire to keep her on his stage indefinitely. This wasn't Paris, where fresh audiences could be fed an unchanging entertainment, but a place where new shows had to be contrived for a static clientele. She glanced at her watch and saw that the time for her appearance on the stage was drawing close.

"I'd better run along and start getting ready for the show," she said, getting up. "Will my horse and buggy b around to take me back to the hotel?"

"At eleven—unless you will honor me by taking supper here after your performance."

Val expected Ching, if he hadn't changed his plans again. But he might show up at any time now, not necessarily after she had finished her act. She decided to be vague. "I don't know," she replied. "I'll see how I feel—afterward."

She went out through the passage, which was practically over her dressing-room, then down a short flight to the large room on which the cells opened. It was well filled with female entertainers in varying condition of costume or deshabille, noise, profanity and shrill laughter. It was some degrees worse than any backstage that Val had ever experienced—and this covered a lot of territory. There wasn't a man in sight.

She went on to her dressing-room and began preparing for the work in hand. If she was to go on at precisely ten there wasn't too much time, but this didn't worry her. The Café Abbaye didn't seem to operate on any set schedule. There was a stage manager, but Val hadn't met him. He was a thin, nervous man who spent most of his time getting one act started and rounding up one to follow. There was no order, no posted list of entertainers with the time for their appearance. It really made no difference, as the acts offered little variety—just women

who strutted the stage singing frank little numbers with no subtlety at all.

A good burlesque stripper from the States would have had these patrons of the Abbaye standing on their chairs and cheering, Val believed. She was a little curious at her own reception, but not naïve enough to attribute it to her dancing. They just liked to look at her and would have been quite as noisily appreciative if she'd done nothing but walk about the stage flirting with them. This and Legarde's build-up. Take a pretty little girl, dress her up (but not too much), bear down heavy with the orchestra, and you'll make an audience believe that here is someone they should have heard of before, even if they haven't. That is, with this kind of audience, which bore some resemblance to those of Manhattan nighteries in its fore-conditioned willingness to cheer almost anything.

She found le Clairon, the orchestra leader, standing in the wings watching a scrawny woman on the stage singing a bumptious ballad in a voice better suited for back-fence brawling. He turned his head to look at Val with morose eyes as she came up.

"Good, eh?" Val jerked her head at the woman on the stage.

"Diabolical! Four or five times each night I must listen to that! Where is Monsieur Legarde? I must demand more money while I am in a temper!" He shuddered convulsively. "This is not the café, Mademoiselle—it is the grave of music! Once I directed a symphony, but now I have come to hell."

"Really?" Val referred to his former occupation, not his present situation, but the leader misunderstood.

"Beyond question, purgatory. Attend that—"

With a quavering wail that would have retired a chorus of banshees into mortified silence, the woman finished her song and headed for the wings, bowing and smirking to acknowledge an applause which did not come. Val suddenly felt sorry for her. Which was worse, she wondered, to realize you are terrible, forced to carry on, or to kid yourself that you are good. Judging from the woman's face as she passed, she had few illusions.

Le Clairon had disappeared down the steps to the orchestra pit and Val saw him weaving between the musicians to his conducting-stand. He rapped smartly with his baton and led the band into a crashing flourish of brass. As it finished, a voice from

someone Val could not see began shouting. *"Mesdames et messieurs, la Mademoiselle Valerie. . . ."* What else he had to say about her forthcoming performance was drowned in a burst of applause which did not cease until the orchestra began her music.

Val went through the routine of her number as she always did, not slacking because she felt she could get away with anything. Such an impulse simply wasn't in her make-up. Le Clairon, having gone through one show with her, left nothing to desire in his co-operation and no more than the split fraction of a second a dancer likes to stay ahead of her music. At the conclusion she was conscious that her breath wasn't holding out as well as it had before her long layoff.

As Val moved toward the wings for her exit a thunder of applause swept through the auditorium. It seemed she'd moved into a nice spot as the little darling of Café Abbaye. The idea amused her as she headed for the dressing-room stairway after a final bow. She could see Aunt Laura's expression while telling the neighbors her little Valerie was now a sensation in Marseilles—and she could also picture her maiden aunt's face if she suddenly learned in what sort of dive the triumph was being staged.

She reached her dressing-room without encountering anyone likely to be numbered among Ching's associates, although she had rather expected Dulonne or perhaps Luis to be hanging around. Old Marthe, who kept what little order there was in the dressing-rooms, followed Val to see if the dancer mightn't have a dash of something to brace her fortitude in dealing with her charges. Perhaps Marthe just wanted a drink for its own sake, but this wasn't what she said. She went away, only mildly disappointed. Marthe wasn't a hopeful woman.

Val stripped off the cat costume, donned a dressing gown, and sat down to make over her face for street wear, leaning closer to the mirror for the job because of the poor lights provided. With her face covered with cold cream, she suddenly paused, pricking up her ears.

There was a queer, muffled sound of voices, like a bad connection on a telephone, apparently coming through the mirror in front of her. For a moment she thought it was a trick of

acoustics, then she recognized one of the voices as being Legarde's. She recalled that his office must be somewhere almost over this cell, but it didn't seem possible for voices to come down through the stone floor. Actually, they did not.

To the curiosity and ambition of a long-dead friar Val owed this opportunity of listening to a conversation not intended for her ears. In his day the chapter house was ordinarily used by the abbot to conduct his private business, and he didn't encourage idling friars near the small building in the garden. What loafing they did was supposed to be in the disciplinary discomfort of their cells.

This fellow, though, possibly motivated by a plan to elevate himself through a bit of ecclesiastical blackmail, had with much labor and pains constructed a primitive speaking-tube in the wall of his cheerless cell, leading then underground to the wall of the chapter house and ending behind a filigree border around the top of the wall inside. The affair had not been disturbed when the chapter house was joined to the main building, long after the prying friar had exchanged his ambition for a moldy bit of earth in a graveyard, and it worked as well as ever.

"What makes you so sure this man you want is hiding in Marseilles?" Legarde was saying.

"Oh, I haven't said I was sure," returned another voice. "But I intend to make certain of it, if he is. There's the possibility that the man has not arrived as yet. This Dulonne, you say, would know?"

"The girl would also know."

Val's heart quickened its beat, not doubting that it was Ching and herself under discussion. She wished she could place the second voice. There was enough familiarity in the sound of it to assure her she'd heard it previously, but not enough for identification. It wasn't Fleber—she was sure of that—or von Stamm. That, she decided, left the Gestapo.

"The girl is wary, and the plan I have offers a better prospect of success. You have sent for Dulonne. When he comes here, you are to warn him that the hiding-place of the man, Dillon, is now known to me and my agents will soon be on their way to gather him in. I expect this Frenchman to hurry to the hiding-place, followed by my men. It may not be that simple, but

worth the trying."

"What do you intend doing with the man, if you find him?" asked Legarde. Val thought he sounded nervous, as though he was being forced into doing something he had little appetite for.

"Take him to Paris, of course. We believe he has possession of a certain object greatly desired by my organization. In Paris there will be means to persuade Dillon to give it up or divulge where it is. I think it may be publicly announced that he is to be executed as a spy; in other quarters it will be intimated that the sentence can be stayed by the surrender of the article we seek—in the event he doesn't have it with him when we place him under arrest."

"It will be unfortunate for him, if he has it," observed the voice of Legarde, moodily. "He would then be shot at once, I think."

"Of course." The voice was callously cold-blooded. "For a number of reasons."

"Or none!"

There was a brief silence before the other voice replied. "Or none, if you prefer. In our hands, his life isn't worth a farthing."

"It has not been my fortune to meet this Dillon," said Legarde in the slow, ponderous tone he used when thinking deeply. "I am not happy to be the one to present him to you, Monsieur—but there is always one's own skin to consider. Even so, I say this, the farthing at which you assay the value of his life may represent a gross overvaluation for the lives of those who take his."

The other voice replied in a sneer. "A brave speech, Legarde. I shall remember the sentiment."

"I am in your hands, Captain Tilsen. If I had not so completely the coward's heart, I would not do this thing for you. But"—his voice trailed off—"a man is no more than he is."

"Keep that in your mind!" The other voice was crisp.

"It has long been present there. Dulonne, I think, will appear in my office before many minutes. It would be well if you are not in view. I suggest you retire into the hall, where you can see Dulonne enter and set your dogs after him when he leaves. I warn you, this Dulonne is not a stupid man. It is my hope—

even while betraying him—that he traps you and your agents in a sewer. A filthy one."

"My men will take care that he doesn't," returned Tilsen. "As for me, I do not go on these expeditions."

"It is pleasant to hear that there are others no braver than Antoine Legarde. Adieu, Captain Tilsen, I wish you poor hunting—"

A sound which might have been that of a closing door came down to Val, indicating that the Gestapo man had left Legarde's office. She was getting into her clothes now with feverish haste, her intention being to try and warn Dulonne of what was going on before Legarde saw him.

An idea of no apparent value popped into her mind as she leaned toward the mirror for that last inspection a woman doesn't go without even in moments of stress. The means that had brought the voices to her—perhaps it worked both ways! She hoped her conversation with Ching the night before hadn't been overheard. Apparently, if it had been heard by Legarde, he had not attached any significance to it, as he had implied just now that Ching was a person unknown to him. She moved her head impulsively to the edge of the mirror where it joined the wall and gave vent to a chuckling laugh which she did not feel. It was a laugh she'd used to scare the pants off Aunt Laura.

Practically, it had the same effect on Antoine Legarde, although Val was not in a position to know it. Sitting at his desk with his heavy head resting on a ham-like hand, he straightened up with remarkable alacrity as the chuckle came faintly from nowhere. His eyes really became visible, or would have if there'd been anyone in his office to take advantage of it. Then he closed them tightly. The voices! He'd heard them before, and combated as absurd the conjecture that they might be the earthly remnants of long-ago murdered friars.

But never had the ghostly voices laughed!

Val heard the sound of a chair scrape across a floor as Legarde pushed himself away from his desk, but she was on her way out of the dressing-room. Further eavesdropping wasn't useful now. She hoped action might be.

She fled through the central room to the stairs. At the top she found herself in the semidarkness which shrouded the corridor

leading past the stage and the entrance, on the left, to Legarde's office.

Recalling that the Gestapo agent, Tilsen, and presumably some of his men would be concealed somewhere near, she restrained her impulse to run and walked nonchalantly down the corridor. Halfway to Legarde's office entrance she choked a gasp of dismay as she saw the small Dulonne suddenly appear and as quickly dart into it.

With all her concentration she took command of herself and walked past as though she had nothing more on her mind than going home. But she knew she was trembling to her toes; she had a nervous difficulty in turning the knob of the little door which would open into the restaurant. Once through, she paused to look out over the cross-shaped room. Fortunately, there was an act going on which held the interest of the patrons and where she stood was in relative darkness.

Her spirits sagged as she remembered that the way she had just come was not the usual exit from the backstage portion of Café Abbaye, and therefore it was unlikely that Dulonne would use it. He would in all probability use the stage entrance —and Val did not know where it was!

It was useless to return, even for the wrap she had left in the dressing-room. With Tilsen and his men lurking in the corridor, she would have no opportunity to warn Dulonne.

Like an animated doll, she began walking slowly between the tables toward the entrance of the café, the sequins on her white evening gown returning tiny flashes of light to the dimly lighted tables. She didn't hear the small bursts of applause coming from the tables as she passed, nor did she see Corporal Fleber rise from his chair to follow in her wake.

Chapter Seventeen: DANGEROUS VISIT

THE PASSAGE OF TIME has bestowed a kindly mantle of charm on many places, but not on the Old Harbor district of Marseilles. The oldest section of the oldest city in western Europe offers nothing to the stranger except opportunity to learn in what degree of debased squalor the human animal can exist. Even the cobbled streets, no wider than alleys, seem furtive

in their crooked winding between the shabby buildings haphazardly bordering them. What might be considered quaint dissymmetry elsewhere was simply shapeless disorder here.

Val had been appalled at the prospect of going afoot to find the house in the Rue Chevennes, but there wasn't any alternative. Not even the red-wheeled barouche was at hand when she came from the Café Abbaye. But Ching must be warned before Dulonne unwittingly led the Gestapo to his hiding-place. With little more than a general idea of the direction she must go, she drowned her apprehension in the thought of Ching's danger and plunged into the labyrinth of the Old Harbor.

More than ever she regretted leaving her wrap behind as she penetrated the crooked street. It would have provided some cover for the white sequin gown, which she knew loomed up in the semidarkness like a sheet on a clothesline. Being young, attractive, and all dressed up was just asking for trouble in this neighborhood.

At first she encountered few of the sinister individuals that peopled the quarter, and these didn't molest her with more than frankly uninhibited comment. Val tried to close her ears to this after overhearing a pointed observation that women hurry only either to or from a man.

By the time she reached another street branching off from this one she was almost running, high heels clacking on the cobbles like machine-gun fire. A stern effort to control her rising terror hadn't much success. Now she was in a more populated thoroughfare, a target for appraising eyes, avoiding hands that reached out to stay her progress.

Abruptly she slowed down. This half-running was making her more conspicuous than ever. Steeling herself, she tried walking, chin imperiously high, and ignoring the vicious barbs of the street harpies, the obscene suggestions of amoral men.

Why, she wondered, did these women hate her so? Certainly she had done nothing to offend them. Val hadn't learned that the aspect of decency is likely to be intolerably offensive to those who do not practice it. The men she could understand well enough; the lascivious attention they displayed wasn't confined to any specific stratum of society. But the women—

She became conscious of the particular and adhesive interest

of a swarthy young Levantine approaching her. As she passed he stopped short, his dark eyes lighting up as though someone had snapped a switch.

"Hola!" he exclaimed softly, and as Val didn't hesitate, he wheeled to follow a few yards behind, steadily and with purpose.

To look back might give him encouragement he doubtless didn't need. She hurried on, keenly aware of the sound of his feet clumping on the cobblestones. Again her nerves swirled in panic, but she mustn't run—she mustn't let anyone know she was afraid! How much farther could it be to the Rue Chevennes—and was she going in the right direction? In the maze of crooked streets she realized that it would be sheer luck if she succeeded in finding it.

Rounding a corner, she hazarded a quick glance over her shoulder—and rammed violently into two men. She restrained the impulse to scream and backed away precipitately.

"Pardon!" she exclaimed.

For a moment neither of the strangers said anything, then one of them, smirking crookedly, found his tongue. "Ah, *Mademoiselle Clair de Lune!"* he exclaimed. "Look you for pleasant adventure?"

"No!" Val measured the distance around them, considering a quick flanking movement and fearfully certain that if she tried they'd be after her like a shot.

"I am without occupation at the moment," he persisted. "It would please me to amuse you."

"No—I am in a very great hurry." Val edged to one side—and so did the obstructing stranger.

"Women do not hurry from Georges until Georges no longer desires them."

Val chilled as she felt a firm grip encircle her wrist. She tried to pull away, glancing helplessly at the man who had not spoken, as if he might intercede. But this one merely stood, hands on hips, watching with keen interest.

"Let me go!" Val jerked again, with no better result. His eyes gleaming with sadistic pleasure, the bully began to twist her wrist, sending a sharp pain up her forearm. She stopped struggling. There was no use resisting and she knew it would be equally futile to expect aid elsewhere. She stood rigidly,

panting but unsubmissive, defiance flaring in her eyes.

Help came, from a totally unexpected quarter. The young tough she had been trying to avoid when she caromed into this double jeopardy came pushing into the group, and still others began to gather around. Val became aware of the newcomer only when his hand closed over the wrist of the man holding hers as he thrust himself between them.

"This woman is mine, *cochon!*" he snarled. "Release her!"

The one who called himself Georges took a step backward, but he had no intention of relinquishing his prize. Instead, he swung his free hand heavily to the invader's face, a roundhouse swing that landed. It staggered the younger man, but didn't discourage him, and recovering his balance, he came back with a rush. In the melée, Val found herself free.

Slipping through the growing ring of spectators, she ran along the street, struggling to control her panic enough to get her breath. She had been frightened before, but not like this, and never with so much reason.

A swift backward glance comforted her with the knowledge that there was no pursuit. At the corner a fierce and deadly fight was raging. Apparently it had spread in a flash from the two original combatants and now several were engaged. So much the better! She ran on. Around the next turning, feeling slightly more secure, she leaned against a wall, breathing like an exhausted fox which had eluded pursuing hounds.

She listened for a moment to the echoing shouts of the battle, then looked around to see where she was. This was merely instinctive, since there was nothing to indicate the direction she wanted to go. A figure moving in the shadows across the street shifted its course toward Val, still backed against the wall in a splash of light from an overhead window of which she wasn't even conscious. She started off again, in a fresh burst of panic.

"Wait!" called a sharp voice.

She saw then it was Fleber. Never far behind after Val left the Abbaye, he had stopped when she ran into trouble, considering what he could do to help. The danger for a man of his nationality was not less than hers in this quarter, and the corporal was fully aware of it. Before he could reach any decision Val had escaped and was flying up the street. He promptly followed.

Val hesitated. At least the German intended her no personal harm, and while she waited his approach a plan to reach her destination came leaping into her mind. In a few long strides Fleber was at her side, frowning an acid reproach.

"Where are you going?" he demanded. "Are you insane, to come here alone?"

"I was beginning to think so," she admitted ruefully. "But your Gestapo friends are responsible."

"The Gestapo?" Fleber's thin eyebrows raised in question.

"Yes. They are working out a dirty scheme to get that diary. And if you can't guide me to the Rue Chevennes very quickly, they'll succeed." She searched his face for some indication of how this affected him, but he only appeared annoyed. Perhaps he wouldn't know the way either. She added, "How do you like that?"

"The Rue Chevennes," he said, peering about the dark street as though for an identifying landmark. A little way beyond where they were standing the entrance to another crooked lane was dimly visible. "I think that will not be far from here."

He touched her arm with the tips of his fingers and started away through the shadows toward this other street. Although there were few others in sight now, Val felt reassured by Fleber's presence.

"You see," Val said, catching up, "once the Gestapo gets their hands on the diary, your colonel may as well go back to Paris and cry on daddy's knee. I doubt that he will be pleased."

"General von Stamm will face complete ruin, perhaps even worse," commented Fleber, unemotionally.

"Does that upset you?"

"No—not altogether. If it does not also affect me badly."

"Is it likely to?" Val persisted, trying for a more pointed reaction.

"Anything a man does may have that result," he hedged.

Damn the man, thought Val. His evasiveness was impenetrable; never for a moment did he drop his habit of guarded speech. Val wanted to know whether Fleber was sufficiently concerned in von Stamm's success to help against the Gestapo. He wasn't giving her much evidence of anything.

"You're timid, aren't you?" she flared.

"Cautious, perhaps."

"Timid," insisted Val. "You're only useful to follow people about. You wouldn't lift your hand to help von Stamm. The Gestapo has you licked."

"You are eager to help von Stamm?" There was calm sarcasm in his tone. "Surprising."

"You know better than that! But I thought you might be willing to help von Stamm by helping me. Your slimy Gestapo intend to take my man to Paris and shoot him as a spy—which he is not. I don't care anything about that damned book, but you do, and von Stamm does—and neither of you has any idea where it is."

"Where did you get this information about Gestapo plans?" asked Fleber, staring ahead as they reached another turn in this tortuous passage.

After short consideration, Val related what she had overheard in her dressing-room. To her surprise, Fleber seemed utterly unimpressed. "What nonsense!" he scoffed.

"Nonsense to you, perhaps!" flared Val. "But not to me."

"A completely stupid idea," Fleber went on, ignoring Val's protest. "I would have expected something better from Captain Tilsen. This man Dulonne is no amateur; it is idiotic to suppose such a childish trick would send him hurrying to Dillon."

Val glanced at the German as though to assure herself he wasn't pulling a fast one himself, but without result. "Do you really believe Dulonne would smell a rat?"

Fleber's short laugh crackled. "So obvious a rat as that—yes. Suppose he did think it necessary to warn your friend, you may be sure that he would not show the way to the Gestapo. He would send another, while he himself led Tilsen's men elsewhere after wild geese."

Impressed and greatly comforted by the German's words, Val began to think she was doing a foolish thing in disclosing Ching's whereabouts to him. On the other hand, she wanted more assurance than he supplied that Ching really was safe from the Gestapo at the moment. She couldn't afford a mistake in any direction. She walked along at Fleber's side in silence, trying to think up a scheme which would permit her to make contact with Ching and not at the same time reveal

his hiding-place to her companion.

They came into a street which Val recognized as the Rue Chevennes by the window of a shop she'd noticed previously. There were more people here and Fleber became uneasy, his eyes darting over each one as they passed in quick appraisal.

"This is the Rue Chevennes," he said. "It is not a good place for strangers."

Not even a good place for those who lived in it, thought Val grimly. Probably it wasn't worse than any of the other streets they had traversed, but definitely more popular with the wandering buckos, shrilling trulls, and other wantons of this waterside Gehenna.

She was staring at the houses on the opposite side as they hurried along, searching for the door to which she had a key in the small bag held crushed in her hand. Unless she could lose Fleber in some way, however, her urge to see Ching would have to be abandoned until later. "Hurry!" grunted the corporal.

Val looked to see what had occasioned his quick command. A crowd of cursing water rats was boiling out of a dingy bistro and in a second Val and Fleber found themselves in the midst of a bitter street fight. What had caused it they did not know or care—in this district these brawls were frequent. With his arm around her, Fleber struggled to get clear of the mob of struggling men. Shunted this way and that, they were once sent sprawling on the cobbles. Fleber was up again instantly, dragging the terrified Val to her feet, the sequin dress irreparably soiled and torn.

They had reached the edge of this maddened maelstrom of men, about to get clear, when Fleber sagged, the arm around Val tightening as though to prevent himself from falling.

"What is it?" she asked shakily. "Are you hurt?"

He didn't answer, inhaling sharply as he plunged forward a few steps. They were free now, but the corporal was having a bad time, weaving drunkenly. He went down on his hands and knees. "Go!" he rasped. "Get away—I—cannot."

"Please try!" wailed Val, in panic. "I won't leave you here."

Staring down at the cobbles, he shook his head. "You must," he muttered. "I—I shall be all right in a moment or two."

Val looked around helplessly. Then she saw what she'd been

looking for before the fight had engulfed them—the amber lamps on the door frame of the house of Ching's refuge. She glanced back at the fight, still going on with undiminished fury, then anxiously at the helpless Fleber, on his hands and knees. Blood dripped from his face to spatter on the cobbles.

Decision came quickly. Fleber was an enemy, but he had helped her when she was alone and afraid. He couldn't be deserted here in a spot where all hands were against him. She stooped and put her arms around him, tugging upward.

"Try hard," she begged. "You can't stay here in the middle of the street. You'll be killed as soon as they discover you aren't one of them. Over there in the shadows you'll be safe until I can get someone to help."

"You are good," he mumbled.

He shook his head as if needing to clear it, then with her help he lunged forward until they reached the shadowed fronts of the houses across the street. Val lowered him into an even darker spot at the side of some steps coming down to the street. Propped against the wall, Fleber pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket and pressed it against an ugly gash in his temple.

"Please go now," he whispered. "I am safe here and the shock will pass. You are brave, Valerie Bright!"

"No, I'm not—I'm scared as hell!"

Picking up her skirts, Val turned and ran along the street to the house which gave entrance to Le Satyre Noir. Breathing like a frightened fawn, she got the key from her beaded bag and fumbled with the lock. Inside she ran into an unexpected obstacle in the shape of a large and frowsy looking Frenchwoman in a sleazy black alpaca dress, who barred the way to the stairs.

"Mademoiselle has a rendezvous with someone?" demanded the woman. "It is not the custom for street women to make appointments here."

Val was staggered by the woman's complacent presumption that here was just another neighborhood baggage engaged in her craft. "Why!" she gasped. "Why, you old, moth-eaten turkey! Do I look like a street woman?"

The woman shrugged. "Like one who has been rolling about in the gutter," she answered. "Also, *ma petite,* I am not one

who has been eaten by moths, nor am I a turkey. I am Madame Juno, and while my house may not be respectable, it is clean. Get out!"

Val glanced down at her sequin gown. It had suffered in transit and in battle. She flushed with the realization that Madame Juno had at least visual reason for her mistake.

"I have come to see Monsieur Dillon, who has a room on the third floor," she said. "And I am in a hurry!"

"Go make yourself clean first," replied the adamant Madame Juno. "It would return a profit, as you are otherwise not bad-looking."

Val's nerves began snapping. "Get out of my way, Madame Pig, before I slap you flat!" she exploded.

Madame Juno didn't budge, but folded her thick arms across her stomach and eyed Val bellicosely. Val, frantic with the thought of the helpless Fleber out on the street and her fear that perhaps Dulonne had fallen for the Gestapo trap, flew at the Frenchwoman in a rough approximation of her Jungle Cat number. She didn't resort to clawing, although the impulse wasn't lacking, but her hands flashed out in a series of resounding slaps which drove the woman back in confusion. Her bulk still offered a barrier in a narrow hall, so Val hurled herself full against the woman's soft mass. Madame Juno, off balance, crashed to the floor.

Leaping over her in a graceful arc, Val sped to the stairs and was well on her way up before the Madame had got started on the task of getting herself upright—something of a project. At the third floor, Val rushed to the door to Ching's dingy quarters and began a wild tattoo until she heard the sound of footsteps within. Ching pulled the door open and stared with amazement at the bedraggled Val. "Well, for the love of—"

"Never mind what I look like!" exclaimed Val. "I had to beat the bejeezes out of your landlady to get up here!"

He pulled the door open wider and stepped back. "Come in," he said. "And what's all this about?"

"There's a man down in the street," Val blurted out. "He's hurt—needs help."

"Who is it?" demanded the correspondent quickly. Obviously, he thought it was someone allied to him.

"A German—Fleber!"

"Oh!" Ching turned as if to go back to his seat by the window. "Why worry about him?"

"Because he was helping me to get here." Val followed him across the room. "We got into the middle of a big fight down there on the street, and he was hurt."

"He was helping you to get here?" Ching was still more puzzled. "But why? What's this all about?"

"Has Dulonne been here—in the last half hour?"

"No."

Val explained quickly the reasons for her journey into the Old Harbor and the difficulties she had met in passage.

"I see," he observed when she concluded. They were on their way downstairs now. "Of course Dulonne wouldn't fall for a gag like that. We'll get some of the boys to take your German friend out of this neighborhood. We owe him that, all right."

"I do, anyway."

They met the dully infuriated Madame Juno in the downstairs hall, but her resentment at having come off badly in the set-to with a mere chit of a girl was put away for another time after a brief but pointed statement from Ching.

In the café Ching found a couple of men to escort Fleber from the district. They weren't happy at the prospect of helping a German, but made no argument and went away through the triangular court. Then Ching seated Val at a table and ordered a bottle of wine.

"Our luck is running bad, pigeon," he said gloomily, after the fat proprietor had waddled back to his perch behind the bar. "I went out to get something to eat an hour or so ago, and while I was away someone got in and stole the diary."

Val sighed and took a little sip of the wine. Now she realized that she was very weary, almost exhausted. That the diary had been taken made no impression for a moment or two, then curiosity set in. "I don't think it would have been von Stamm who got it," she said.

"Neither do I," agreed Ching, tapping his cigarette on a saucer which served as an ash tray. "It's damned baffling. Whoever got it knew something about this house and came in through the front. Madame Juno declares the only persons to

come in during that time were a couple who engaged a room. That is hardly unusual here, you know."

"A couple? Are they still in the house?"

"Of course not," replied Ching, smiling faintly. "Just some woman from the street and her pick-up. They don't stay long."

Val was still curious. "What did they look like? Or do you know?"

Ching made an indifferent gesture with his hand. "The usual thing—a sailor, Madame Juno says, with a tawdry pavement pounder."

"Did she know the woman? I mean, was it one of her regulars?"

"Madame wasn't clear about that. She says the dame must have been here before, otherwise she wouldn't have known about the dump."

Val shook her head decisively. "She isn't sure enough to prove they didn't come to snitch the diary."

"That's hardly likely," Ching objected. "The Gestapo wouldn't have bothered with stooges, if they knew where to look for the diary themselves. They would have raided this place in force. But I don't see how they could have known. Following the clerk wouldn't have helped—he only brought it from the hotel and gave it to another man, who in turn slipped it to the fellow who delivered it. The underground doesn't make trailing them an easy matter."

Val sipped a little more of the wine without thinking of its flavor. From what Ching said, it didn't seem probable the Gestapo had traced the book. Besides, the man she had overheard talking to Legarde evidently had no idea of where Ching was hiding and wouldn't have cared, had he known the location of the wanted diary.

"Well," she summed up, "there's one thing sure—if von Stamm engineered this stunt, he'll be scramming for Paris as fast as he can. And no matter which outfit has it, there won't be much chance to get it back again, will there?"

"Slim," Ching agreed dismally.

Val, about to propose their immediate departure from Marseilles if this was the case, changed her mind after a look at Ching's eyes. He was depressed, and this wouldn't be a good

moment for such a suggestion. It would be better to wait until he realized the futility of staying. "I want to go back to the hotel now," she said, looking down at her soiled dress with some dismay. "Do you suppose you could find something to cover me up? I can't go into the hotel looking like this."

Ching got up and walked over to the bar, where he entered into a conversation with the proprietor. After a moment or so the fat man slid from his stool and disappeared through a small door at the end of the bar. Ching swung around, his back to the bar, and nodded toward Val. He got out cigarettes and lighted one, and then the proprietor returned, handing Ching a black bundle.

"It's a shawl," explained Ching, coming back to the table. He shook it out, revealing an exquisite creation of black silk. "Compliments of Madame Juno, and stolen from God knows where. I'm afraid the Madame isn't too fussy about the sources of her income."

"She gave it to me?" Val was surprised. "White of her—after the slapping around she got."

"Actually, she wasn't consulted." Ching held the shawl spread out for Val as she got up. "The stout party behind the bar helped himself. Luis will be outside in a moment with a carriage to take you home."

This was surprising, too. Val hadn't seen the Spanish boy all night and supposed he wasn't anywhere around. Ching said Luis had been sleeping in one of the downstairs rooms until the fat man sent him out to find a conveyance.

"It was a shame to disturb him," said Val.

"Luis never sleeps for more than two or three hours at a time," replied Ching as they went out into the little court. "He is very restless—gets up and prowls around for a while, then sleeps a little more."

"Poor Luis!" Val felt she understood his inability to rest. "He is a tragedy."

"Right," agreed Ching. "The nightmare in his mind will never leave him. He will probably go completely mad in time. And there are many like him."

"Couldn't something set him right?"

"I don't think so, Val. His life is all behind him—at seven-

teen! If you knew his story, you could understand."

"I *do* know his story—he told me." Val looked up at Ching gravely. "That's what made me determined to beat the Nazis whenever I can. I hate them, but it was that miserable Deja who taught me how. I guess I've been pretty dumb about things before."

Ching patted her affectionately on the shoulder. "That's fine," he said. "Makes me feel a little better about losing the diary. I wouldn't say that you were ever dumb, though. Just reluctant to leave childhood behind and face reality."

"Being a child is nice—"

"But not practical for a grown-up. You know, right now I'd like to hold you tight and kiss you—"

"I wouldn't scream."

Ching laughed softly. "That tough egg there might misconstrue—" He broke off, nodding toward a swarthy Marseillais in the street entrance to the court, probably on guard. Then his gaze shifted to a point beyond this fellow. "Oh—there's Luis!"

They came out of the passage into the street. A closed hack stood opposite, the Spanish boy engaged in conversation with the driver.

"I'll get in touch with you in the morning," Ching said.

"The blind man—*Night and Day?*" Val looked up at him inquiringly. "Not too early, pal. Give me time to dress."

"Oh, no. To keep on using the same stunt isn't safe policy. But you'll hear from me." He put his hands lightly on her shoulders, turning her to face him. *In the black shawl, with a darker make-up, she'd look as Spanish as Luis,* he thought. "Meanwhile, don't go getting into trouble on your own any more. You're too precious—now more than ever."

So he kissed her, holding her tightly, and without regard for the watching Marseillais, Luis, or anyone else. Val got into the hack, feeling not nearly so weary now. She'd had only a little wine, so it *couldn't* have been that which revived her jaded being. She glanced out at Ching, still standing at the side of the hack, and then a thought which had been trying for attention for some time crashed through. Thrusting a silver-slippered foot against the door which Ching was in the act of closing, she leaned forward, her eyes shining excitedly.

"Ching! I think I know!"

"Know what, darling?"

"Who has the diary!" she exclaimed, more softly. "The raffish gent and his lady friend—I think I know who they were. Phone me in the morning and—for the benefit of listeners in—ask me if it was Adam and Eve who ate the apple."

She pulled the door shut and the vehicle began rolling slowly away over the cobbles. Luis, she noticed through the window, was keeping pace in the shadows of the grim old buildings.

Chapter Eighteen: THE EIGHTH OF NOVEMBER

LIFE, VAL DECIDED, was merely existence when a girl had to get into clothes and go out looking for breakfast. This necessity imposed an unfair handicap right at the start. She shivered in a tepid bath, then dressed in the chilly room, tormented with poignant memories of fine breakfasts once served while she was cozy in her warm bed.

Resolutely, she directed her thoughts into other channels. Nedry. Had that precious hussy gone with Jurg Sampson to the Old Harbor and made off with the diary? They'd certainly been dressed for such an excursion when Val saw them in the hall. She could not, however, imagine any way in which Nedry could have learned where the diary was.

She frowned at herself in the mirror as she pulled a little hat around on her head for the best effect. If Nedry or Sampson really had the diary, there must be some way that she, Valerie Bright, could make certain of it. There might also be an opportunity to get it back.

As she started across the room in the direction of the door the knob rattled and someone began a light but impatient tattoo on the wooden panel, as though in a hurry to be admitted. Val went on and opened the door far enough to see who this early caller could be. It was Ching, turning his head nervously in an effort to watch both ends of the corridor at once. As he heard the opening door, he pushed into the room.

"Ching!" gasped the startled Val. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"Not looking for sanctuary, my love," he answered, closing

the door behind them. He turned the knob which operated the catch. "Just the same, don't receive any other visitors until I've gone again."

"You came through the lobby! That was—foolish— The place is filled with Nazi agents!"

"Also with my friends, for that matter."

He came away from the door, took her arm, and marched her along, stopping at the steps at the railing and sitting down. Val hesitated, then sat down at his side. There were chairs, but Ching for some curious reason usually preferred something else to sit on. He lighted a cigarette, then grinned cheerfully at her puzzled expression before he spoke.

"I didn't come through the lobby, though," he continued. "The Dijon, like other hotels, has another entrance dedicated to servants, tradesmen—and fellows like me. The only danger was in meeting one of your Nazi pals in a hallway."

"Since you are here, I guess you didn't," she replied. "But—what's all the shooting for?"

"Big news!"

"Well, put it out."

"The British and Americans began landing in North Africa this morning." He looked at her excitedly, but Val wasn't greatly impressed. Africa was a good way off, she thought.

"Dakar?" she asked. "What good does that do us?"

"No. Algiers—Casablanca—all along the coast. But, for us, it's no help. It only makes things tougher."

"That's just what we need," Val commented tersely. "How?"

Ching made a comprehensive gesture with his hands.

"Vichy will break off diplomatic relations with Washington, I think, and the Nazis will certainly occupy the rest of France. Quickly, too. If we're caught in France, we'll very likely end up in a concentration camp inside Germany."

"I wouldn't like that," demurred Val, a little frightened. "How much time have we to get out, do you think?"

"Probably two or three days. It will take the Germans that long to move in troops."

Val took one of Ching's cigarettes, lighting it from the match he struck for her. This news rather shattered any plans they had made, she thought, as she blew a thin line of smoke into the

air. She turned to examine Ching's face, to see how he was reacting. He seemed calm enough.

"What are we going to do, Ching?" she asked.

"We'll have to slide out of here on *l'Hirondelle*—that's the fancy name for the dull-looking fishing smack. The plan has been changed, however. The boat is being brought down to the Old Harbor. You see, there's quite a fleet of fishermen who leave here around three in the morning and we intend to move out with them. We're afraid the other place is under observation and a single boat putting out from there would be spotted."

"How am I going to get aboard?" Val demanded. "That Fleber person trails me wherever I go."

"You go to the Abbaye as usual tonight and do your show. Tell Legarde you're leaving tomorrow—and be sure that you are overheard. There'll be Gestapo about and it'd be nice to mislead 'em. We'll take care of you from that time on. Fleber, too." Ching looked grim.

"How about my bag and trunk? I don't want to lose my things if I can help it—they're all I have. There's another bag at the Abbaye, too."

"Pack the stuff you have here—and it will be brought to the boat after you've gone to the café. Your hotel bill will be taken care of at the same time." Ching got up, squishing his cigarette on an ash tray as he passed the table. "I've got to get along—there's still a lot to do. And don't worry, pigeon, we'll get through."

"Be careful, darling—the Gestapo would be only too happy to meet you."

"I'll be that, all right," he assured her as he moved toward the door. With his hand on the knob he hesitated, frowning, and looked at Val. "It's just too damned bad we're not getting away with the diary. You said last night you had an idea about who might have taken it. Any meat in it?"

"Rationed." Val laid a hand over the one holding the doorknob. "Don't be too hopeful, Ching, but I'm going to have a try at locating it this afternoon. There won't be anything else much to fill in the day."

His frown evaporated and the corners of his mouth twinkled.

"Now I *am* hopeful," he said. "Before, I wasn't. If you've

started that tricky little mind of yours to working on it, nothing will surprise me greatly. But don't try to outsmart Nazi agents, if that's what you're thinking of doing. Remember, they haven't any rules."

He went out into the hall, closing the door after him. Val stood for a little while, listening to his light, retreating footsteps until she could no longer hear them. Then she opened the door again and went out, locking it carefully as though there was a reason for it. She saw no one in the hall and, walking on her toes to avoid making noise with her heels, she went down the corridor to Nedry's room.

Wondering if it was the newswoman's habit to go out early, Val stopped and listened attentively. Faint sounds beyond the door indicated the presence of someone inside. Val twisted the doorknob with quick gratification to find the door wasn't locked, opened it, and entered.

"My dear!" she exclaimed. "Do you really get up at ten every morning—or is this something unusual?"

Nedry was startled—and showed it. She seemed to have been doing a bit of sewing with some blue material. Whether she resented being caught in a moment of domesticity or not, she quite evidently wasn't pleased with the intrusion. "Don't people knock where you come from?" she demanded frostily.

"Oh, yes—they do!" chirped Val. "But I wasn't sure you'd understand. You're so free and easy about doors yourself. What are you making?"

"A hat," answered Nedry shortly. "There isn't a damn thing to be had in Marseilles that I would wear."

"I didn't know you knew how to make a hat."

"In a war you learn how to do a lot of things."

"I'll say!" agreed Val heartily.

She felt quite sure, though, that better hats were to be had in Marseilles than Nedry could hope to make herself. Val leaned carelessly against the wall, her eyes roving about the newswoman's room without seeing anything which might be a clue to last night's enterprise. She had no idea of what this could be, but there might have been some trifling object. The diary, of course, if Nedry had it, would be safely hidden.

"Won't you sit down?" invited the woman, with heavy sar-

casm.

Val ignored the tone. "I just dropped in to see how you liked the show last night. I suppose I should have been more polite about crashing in as I did."

"I would appreciate it—in the future."

"Sorry, pet." Val smiled cheerfully. "It's a bit risky, too, barging into someone's room without warning. Could be embarrassing."

Nedry put away her sewing and got up, her eyes suspicious.

"What's that crack for?" she demanded sharply.

"It's not a crack, darling. I was just thinking of the bad luck you had in my room. I don't suppose you knocked before you went in. Skip it. How'd I do last night?"

"Pretty good," replied Nedry, rather vaguely. "You need more exercise. You're getting stiff, I think. Of course, you're getting older, too."

"Thanks for the reminder. Did you like the new costume?"

The question was an effort to discover whether the woman really had been at the Café Abbaye. It didn't work. Nedry's experience and native wariness made her difficult to catch off base.

"New costume? Was it a new one? I never gave it a thought —just supposed it was the same old one, dear!" She laughed theatrically—and Val fancied there was a triumphant note in it.

"Aw, I'll bet you weren't near the Abbaye," Val returned, as though it really didn't matter.

Nedry made a face. "You're wrong about that, hoofer."

Val was about to continue the probe, but the newswoman seemed to think the topic exhausted, wandering to a mirror and correcting the line of her mouth with lipstick. Anyway, since the Abbaye wasn't far from the Rue Chevennes, it was possible Nedry could have visited both.

"Where are you headed for—breakfast? Or are you just coming in?" Nedry inquired indifferently.

It wouldn't do any good to be too antagonistic toward Nedry, if she expected to learn anything from her. Much better to act as though unaware of anything that might worsen the tenuous regard they held for each other. Val realized that any shift from her critical and frequently belittling attitude for something more chummy would only arouse quick suspicion.

"Call it breakfast, if you like," Val replied, with a rueful nod. "Had yours?"

"Heavens, no. I never touch anything to eat until afternoon."

"No good asking you to come along, then." Val sauntered back to the door, Nedry watching her discreetly in the mirror. At the door, Val swung around. "When are you taking off for the villa in Hyères?"

The question disconcerted Nedry for a split second, then she drawled an answer as though putting it together as she spoke.

"I don't know—there's a difficulty about passing through Toulon, for some fool military reason. You'd think France was still in the war, with all the red tape, and stuff."

"Well—the war is still in France," countered Val. Evidently the woman hadn't heard the news of the morning which Ching had brought. Val decided not to mention it, as she was making her first foray outdoors and presumably wouldn't know about it either. Nedry might want to know where Val had heard about the invasion. She opened the door, still looking back at Nedry, now standing with her back to the mirror, watching indifferently. Val bobbed her head in pert farewell. "Drop in some time—I'm often out."

Her laughter echoed in the room as she closed the door and clattered down the hall toward the stairway. Nedry, though, wasn't amused. Turning back to the mirror, she stared thoughtfully at her reflected face, tapping the nail of a little finger against her teeth, until the echo of Val's heels in the hall faded away. Then she glanced at the door with a look of bright-eyed suspicion.

There was an air of excitement in the lobby of the hotel as Val came from the stairs, groups of persons chattering at each other, and a few of the ubiquitous German "tourists" standing around looking very glum.

Val caught sight of Colonel von Stamm standing near the street doors. He was speaking earnestly to Corporal Fleber, who looked a bit pale and wore a bandage around his injured temple. Val was relieved to see that the corporal had escaped further disaster in the Old Harbor. She hadn't felt very sure he had. Fleber interrupted the colonel, who then turned his head to watch her as she walked toward the entrance.

Von Stamm's presence in the hotel was some indication that it had not been he who'd made off with the diary, as he would have by this time been streaking back with it to Paris. With the vague idea of somehow confirming the thought, Val shifted her course toward the two Germans, but as she approached she caught a slight shake of Fleber's head, as though warning her against something. Perhaps, she decided quickly, she'd better skip it for the time being and wait until she saw Fleber alone, which was likely, if he was still working at keeping her in view. He would make no bones about telling her if von Stamm had been successful. Why should he—or the colonel, either? However, as she was about to pass, von Stamm moved to intercept her. "You have heard the news, Fräulein?" he asked, with a jerky little bow.

"News? What's happened?" She became conscious of the buzz of excitement in the lobby again. "Has Hitler given himself up, or something?"

Colonel von Stamm's thin lips twisted in a brief, sullen smile.

"The British and Americans are attempting a landing in North Africa," he said. It was almost a sneer. "Your President Roosevelt has spoken over the radio to all Frenchmen, promising them the moon. Meanwhile, the landings are being resisted with all the force the French can muster. I believe your countrymen and the swinish British will be quickly pushed back into the sea."

Val looked convincingly astonished. "Why, I thought they were going to Dakar! That is, I should have, if I'd thought about it at all."

"Unfortunately, so did we, or steps would have been taken to prevent even this amateurish invasion."

Val seemed to recover her insouciant poise. "Don't tell me the Fuehrer's intuition backfired on him! My, my!" She chuckled throatily. "Do you suppose he may be slipping?"

Colonel von Stamm's face reddened and his eyes sparkled. "This affair has only begun!" he snapped. "If the French do not throw the invaders out, we shall. No British or American army will ever set foot in Europe—except to become prisoners."

"That's what you think—or do you, really?" replied Val airily. "Just the same, it's nice to know that for once the Ger-

mans didn't get there first."

"In war," said von Stamm didactically, "it is not so important to be the first on the field as to hold it at the end."

"That's what the British do, isn't it—lose all the battles except the last? That's something I read somewhere."

"In this war they shall lose *all* the battles, including the last," von Stamm declared firmly.

Val pursed her lips, making her eyes big. "Then we Americans will have to win the war all by ourselves, I guess. Maybe the Russians will keep on helping after the British have lost the next-to-the-last battle."

"The Americans!" sneered von Stamm. "An untrained mob!"

"Ask your papa about the Americans—he probably met them in 1918!" snapped Val, becoming irritated. "Speaking of him, I think he's out of luck so far as his diary is concerned."

"What do you mean, Fräulein? What has happened to the *tagebuch?*"

"Perhaps Captain Tilsen can tell you."

"Captain Tilsen?"

The colonel's eyes swept the lobby of the hotel as though looking for the man. Val, about to follow suit in the hope of getting a look at the Gestapo chief for purposes of future identification, desisted as she saw by von Stamm's expression that whoever he looked for what was not in sight. "That's his name," she said. "Look him up. Now I'm off for breakfast." She glanced at Fleber and smiled chummily. "Coming, Corporal?"

"Wait!" The colonel laid a hand on her arm to detain her. "Is it so that the Gestapo has the book?"

"I wouldn't know—for sure," replied Val. "But that's what I hear. Is that bad? Surely they will return it."

"Gott im Himmel!" exploded von Stamm, his eyes popping out in a wild stare. *"Gott im Himmel!"*

Val walked toward the entrance, her husky laugh trailing behind like smoke from a locomotive. Well, she knew now that von Stamm hadn't been implicated in last night's raid on Ching's room. That was something, since she'd toyed with the idea that perhaps Nedry had been making herself a penny by working for the colonel.

At breakfast she found herself contemplating the news of the British-American landings in North Africa. During the short walk to the little restaurant she'd overheard Frenchmen greeting each other with, "The Americans are coming," and in tones of not very well concealed elation.

A half hour later Val returned to the Dijon. She had expected Corporal Fleber to come tagging after her to the café, but he seemed at least temporarily to have abandoned this chore.

The pseudo-American, Cedric Darrell, was standing at the desk when she came in. She got the impression that he had moved into this position as he saw her entering, but wasn't sure about it. He greeted her with a bland grin as she stopped at the desk on the off-chance that there might be some sort of message waiting her return. The clerk was the large-nosed fellow distrusted by Ching as a Vichy informer and probably a member of Laval's private police.

"There have been no messages for you, Mademoiselle," he replied to her query—without looking at the pigeonholes where messages were kept.

Keeping tabs on me, eh, Val thought, as she turned away. To her annoyance the Englishman, Darrell, fell into step with her as she headed for the elevator.

"Good morning, Miss Bright," he said, pleasantly.

Val turned her head, nodded with an expressionless smile, and kept on determinedly across the lobby. She didn't see anything to be gained in talking to the man, or listening, either. Darrell, however, wasn't to be discouraged so easily.

"I enjoyed your performance last night tremendously," he hurried to say. "Spectacular—spectacular, *I* call it."

"Oh, thanks! Kind of you." She didn't slacken her pace.

"You've heard the news, I take it?" he asked. Seeing by her expression that she had, he went on: "We shall have to be getting out before the Germans take over the rest of France. If we don't, I'm afraid our chance of escape won't be worth a farthing, Miss Bright."

Val felt a twinge of recollection; there was something familiar in that last phrase he'd used, "Our chance of escape won't be worth a farthing—" Now his voice impressed her as one she'd heard elsewhere than in this hotel lobby. Fleber's warning

about strangers also flashed into her mind.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, as comprehension dawned. Her memory got a quick, fruitful workout. She laughed. "But the farthing at which you value our escape may be a gross overvaluation," she parroted. "To think I really fell for your act as an Englishman pretending to be American! It's too good!"

"Why do you say such a thing?" he demanded, staring at her in bewilderment. His amazement filtered the English accent from his voice, his "s" took on the sound of "z", and the vowels flattened in the Saxonian manner. "You are being ridiculous!"

"Thanks, but I'm not." Her mind conceived an audacious plan. She had already sold von Stamm on the idea that the Gestapo had gained possession of the diary; if she could convince the Gestapo that von Stamm had it, both parties would be at least temporarily removed from her hair.

"You are an extraordin'ry young woman," he said, recovering his role after the momentary lapse. "Extraordin'ry!"

"And you are Captain Tilsen, Gestapo slicker," she retorted.

His eyes glittered unpleasantly, bringing the disturbing reflection to Val of having aroused an open antagonism which might be too great for her to cope with. But it was too late to back down now.

"You are quite too clever for your own good, Miss Bright," he said after a pause. "It may land you in a concentration camp, where I'm sure you would find it most uncomfortable."

"Why?" she demanded flatly. "Does the glory of the Reich call for that sort of thing because I am an American?"

"No, but because you are hindering the work of my organization in obtaining something we want."

"Phooey! Are you afraid to name it?" she derided. "You mean the diary of General von Stamm, don't you?"

"Exactly."

"Why don't you get it from the General instead of annoying me? I haven't got it."

"General von Stamm? The diary was stolen from him—"

"That's yesterday's papers, mister. You should keep up with things, really. It shouldn't take Colonel von Stamm longer than a day to deliver the diary to his father." Val tried to make her eyes twinkle, but wasn't very sure she succeeded.

"Colonel von Stamm has recovered the diary?"

The Gestapo man was at first astonished, then an expression of cunning disbelief showed in his eyes.

"I think he has it—but not that he recovered it himself," said Val, trying to work up a plausible story. "That other man, the one who has a bandage around his head today."

"Nonsense! Fleber would not have given it to von Stamm. He is—" Tilsen stopped abruptly, realizing he was about to commit the unpardonable sin of talking out of turn.

"I know," supplied Val, concealing her surprise with an effort. "Fleber is a Gestapo man, but hasn't it occurred to you that a rat who'd double-cross his own mother for Herr Himmler might do it to anyone else, if it suited him?"

"You are impertinent!"

"You are naïve!" Val's throaty laugh rippled. "Look, old thing, if I had the diary, I would trade it to you in a minute for passage to the Spanish border for myself and my friend. That's all it could be worth to me. Why should I be interested in the private scandals of the *Kommandant* of Paris? Anyhow, I don't read German, no matter how spicy it may be."

"You don't read German?" The disbelief was slowly receding.

"Or speak it either."

"I understand this man Dillon does."

"Sure, he does." Val was now wishing the elevator man would respond to her signal.

"Then he probably knows what General von Stamm was indiscreet enough to write in the diary."

"I doubt it. He hadn't much chance to do any reading after he got it. I had it most of the time—until yesterday." Listening attentively, she thought she heard the car descending. "Then it was taken to a house in the Old Harbor."

"And there sold to Corporal Fleber?" Tilsen was suspicious again. "To give to Colonel von Stamm."

"No—not sold," corrected Val. She decided on another tack. "What's the use of telling you anything? You don't believe me, and I don't care. You Nazis lie so much you don't know truth when you hear it. Actually, all I know is that the diary was taken from Ching Dillon's room last night while he was out.

When you see this Fleber, ask him what he was doing in Old Harbor at that time. Also ask him about the woman he was with."

Val felt certain Tilsen wouldn't get the correct answer to either question, and hoped whatever he learned would result in confusing him. The elevator grille opened noisily and the little Frenchman peered out. Val started in: Captain Tilsen detained her with a light touch on her arm. "A moment, please!" he exclaimed, his eyebrows knitted in concentration. "I am going to check these statements you have made—and if you have been lying to me, I can promise that you will pay."

"Okay, but you'd better work fast—the colonel will be checking out for Paris just as quick as he can—if I'm right. I could be wrong, you know." Val pulled her arm away. "So far, I'm betting on the colonel—he seems to be lots smarter than you."

The grille crashed shut and the little Frenchman started the car, looking at Val from inscrutable, rheumy eyes. He had the ribbon of the Croix de Guerre sewed to the breast of his faded uniform coat. "*Un boche!*" he grunted contemptuously.

Val looked at him curiously. "How did you know—he doesn't look German?"

"For four very long years, Mademoiselle, I fought against them. They have an unmistakable odor!"

Val laughed, but didn't say anything. She was beginning to learn a little discretion about trusting anyone just because he appeared to have proper sentiments. The old fellow, though, did not seem anxious to continue the conversation and let her out at her floor with no more comment.

Back in her cheerless room, Val sat down to contemplate what she had been doing. It soon became clear to her that setting Tilsen on von Stamm's trail wasn't going to accomplish what she had desired. It wouldn't take the Gestapo man long to reach the conclusion that since von Stamm was *not* rushing back to Paris, it was unlikely he had the diary.

It was probable, too, now that she thought of it, that von Stamm would have little hesitancy in quizzing Captain Tilsen as to whether or not he had it, and that the latter's denial might be believed. By the very asking, von Stamm would demonstrate her hastily conceived plan to mislead them, with the net result

that both parties would conclude the diary was still in either her possession or Ching's.

This was the result of doing things without careful thinking first, she concluded wryly. Trying to deceive those who were well grounded in deception was just one more item that had been omitted from her curriculum. That sort of thing had better be left to Ching or Luis.

Abandoning this line as milk already spilled, she began to consider Nedry's probable reaction to the news of the Allied landing in Africa. Nedry and her playmate, Sampson, should be in a great hurry to move on into Spain along with other trapped Americans in Southern France. Having obtained the precious diary, there wouldn't be anything except lack of transportation to hold them in Marseilles. She dismissed the idea that Nedry might be serving either von Stamm or Tilsen, as they seemed not to be aware of her at all.

Val decided to look into this situation at once and hurried to the newswoman's room, hoping she hadn't as yet gone out. This time she rapped on the door, a long tattoo. The door opened a couple of inches and Nedry's face appeared.

"Well, Val, what do you want now?" demanded the woman.

"I stopped to see if you'd heard the news." Val shrugged. "Of course—"

A masculine voice called out, "Come in, Val."

Nedry made a face, then opened the door wider. Jurg Sampson was standing near the table where Nedry had been sewing, apparently having just arrived. His Homburg hat was still in his hand. He grinned at Val in high good humor, by this adding considerable weight to her suspicions. Jurg normally wasn't jaunty. "What's cooking?" he asked. "Seen Ching?"

"I guess I'm too late," returned Val, with a rueful chuckle. "I thought I was bringing hot news to Nedry about the landing in Africa. But I've been scooped, haven't I? Yes, I've seen Ching —last night."

"Sorry to have beaten you with the news," returned Sampson loftily. "It's hot stuff, too. Now we Americans will have to scram out of France. Too bad, with you just going to work again." He paused a moment, then asked, "Where did you see Ching?"

"At the Abbaye," lied Val. "He's been having some bad

luck." Couldn't be any harm in telling these people what they presumably already knew.

"Bad luck?" Nedry cocked an eyebrow at Val as though Ching's having a misfortune was news indeed.

"Yes. That silly diary was swiped from him while he was away from his quarters last night. He's pretty upset about it, but I guess he'll get over it."

"You'd have been smart to play ball with me," said Nedry.

Val shrugged her shoulders, then went to the table and inspected the hat Nedry was making. It was nearly finished and really a fetching job—on the order of a profile beret, with a ridge curling up from over one eye to the back, the blue silk giving the effect of the curling side of a wave, whether planned or not. Val believed it accidental.

"Nifty!" she exclaimed, reaching for it.

Nedry thrust out a hand to stop her. "No touchee!" she exclaimed. "It's not all sewed together yet—and I don't want it to fall apart. I've been two hours getting it like that!"

Val pursed her lips, still staring at the hat, and put her hands behind her as though to avoid temptation.

"What's Ching going to do?" asked Jurg, who'd settled into a chair. He slid his hips forward, leaned back, and crossed his legs, the back of his neck resting on the top of the chair.

Val swung around toward him, with an elaborately puzzled frown. "What's he going to do?" she asked. "Why, lam out of Marseilles with everyone else, I suppose."

"I mean about the diary."

"Oh, *that!*" Val laughed shortly. "What can he do? The Gestapo has it, he says. So that's the end of it."

Nedry was watching Val narrowly, and now she seemed convinced by the dancer's excursion into dramatic art—or as much so as she ever permitted herself to be. "He'd have a sweet time getting it away from those babies," she affirmed, with a trace more emphasis than was required, Val thought.

"I don't suppose you've done anything about leaving," Val asked, as though the subject of the diary was exhausted. "Of course not—there hasn't been time."

"I've been to the Gare St. Charles," said Jurg. "There are almost no trains running anywhere, and the station is packed

with people trying to get away. Not all Americans, either."

"I guess it won't be so easy." Val wondered if it would be a good plan to bring Nedry and Sampson along to Ching's fishing boat. This offered the possibility of having the diary within reach, since Val was reasonably sure Nedry had it. But she'd have to consult with Ching before she did anything so drastic as inviting the couple to escape with them.

"It's not going to be easy at all," agreed Jurg unhappily. "There will be a train for Lyon about ten tonight—"

"Who wants to go to Lyon?" demanded Nedry fretfully. "That's the wrong direction."

"Well, not necessarily," Jurg argued. "It might be possible to go on into Switzerland tomorrow."

"I don't want to go there, either," objected Nedry. "I want to go home—and the quickest way is through Spain."

"That's what you think." Jurg frowned knowingly. "Anyhow, I've been thinking it might be a good plan to take this train as far as Arles and see what we could do there in the way of getting a train west. There'll be nothing from here going in that direction, I think."

"You children argue it out," Val cut in. "But don't do anything until I've seen Ching. He may have some way out planned —and he knows about such things."

"I'll say he does." Jurg wagged his head emphatically. "When are you going to see him?" He struggled up from the chair and went with Val to the door.

"Just as soon as I can find him," returned Val. "Stick around."

"I guess we'll be doing that, all right," growled Nedry. "At least for the afternoon."

Val returned to her room, debating whether to go with Nedry and Sampson to Arles—if they decided to go there—or keep to Ching's plan and add this scheming pair to their party, if possible. One virtue of the latter suggestion was that they couldn't very well slip away from her when it suited them. Val was dubious about keeping them in sight on the way to the Spanish border without help, but she had no intention of making a try for the diary immediately. Better let them carry it for her—neither the Gestapo nor von Stamm would have any

reason to suspect it was in Nedry's keeping.

Then she reflected that this was conclusion-jumping again. These fellows weren't such fools as not to become suspicious of anyone they saw her getting chummy with. Having established to their mutual satisfaction that she had been leading them among the laurels, they would be keenly interested in anyone with whom they saw her.

This was a strong argument for leaving Nedry to her own devices, but had the weakness that Val didn't want to let her out of sight until the moment was favorable to regain possession of the diary. Now she wished Ching was handy to help her decide what to do. "Help her decide" was euphemistic. He'd *tell* her what to do—and she felt vaguely it would be to keep out of the enterprise completely.

Well, she wasn't going to!

Chapter Nineteen: SUPERCARGO

BY SOME MIRACLE OF FORTUNE, Ching was at the Satyre Noir when Val arrived an hour or so later. Getting away from the Hotel Dijon without being observed had posed a problem requiring a stretch of thinking, but had been accomplished with entire success, she believed. Remembering that Ching had spoken of having come to her room via the service entry, Val decided to use it as an egress. The difficulty was she hadn't the remotest idea where it could be located.

The veteran elevator attendant provided the answer to this. Not liking to trust him with too much, Val explained she was trying to avoid the German who had annoyed her earlier in the day. The old fellow was entirely willing to guide her through the cellars of the Dijon to still another exit opening into the same narrow alley as the service entrance. From there on it had been simple enough to find her way to the Old Harbor.

Ching was in the little café—and so were a lot of other people, mostly flinty-eyed men. He was sitting at a table with Dulonne when Val stopped in the doorway, recoiling instinctively at the prospect of entering a room filled with such a crew as this. Ching saw her and leaped up, hurrying toward her.

"What's wrong, Val?" he demanded.

"There isn't anything wrong," she answered, looking beyond him at the crowded tables. "That is, nothing new."

Ching sighed. "Gosh, you scared me, pigeon, when I saw you pop into the doorway here. Thought perhaps you were just a jump ahead of the Gestapo." He smiled down at her, then glanced into the court. "Where's your shadow, Fleber?"

"I ditched him, and all the rest," replied Val. "If you'd take me somewhere to sit down, I might tell you about it."

"Care to risk Madame Juno?"

"Who's afraid of Madame Juno? Does she want a return match?"

"I think not." Ching's mouth flickered in a reminiscent grin. "At least she hasn't asked for one. Come on."

Accustomed as she was to being looked at, Val breathed easier when they were beyond the door leading into the hall of Madame Juno's establishment. Instead of taking the stairs, Ching kept on along the hall toward the front of the house, where he opened a door into a room furnished as a parlor. He pushed her down onto a sofa she wouldn't have considered sitting on without coercion, then sat gingerly on the end of it himself. "Now—give!" he ordered. "What brings you here?"

"You, of course," replied Val, giving him a look of drooling sentiment. "You know, darling, 'whither thou goest'—that stuff. Even to a joint like this—and if Aunt Laura knew about it, I'd be rubbed off the calling list of everyone in Terre Haute—except some of the men."

"Stop kidding, Val, and get down to brass tacks, will you?"

Val poked a tentative finger into the upholstery of the couch. "From where I sit, I'm past the brass tacks and onto the framework of this period piece. Oh, all right—I came to have a conference with you."

"That's illuminating. Begin conferring."

"Okay—just hush a minute. I've got a plan to bring the diary along with us when we go boating tonight."

"What!" Ching was overwhelmed. "Where is it?"

"I don't know—exactly."

"You don't know— Say, are you trying to drive me nuts?"

"That isn't needed," returned Val, pointedly. "I said I didn't know exactly. Nedry or Sampson have it—they're the ones who

came here last night and hooked it. I'm pretty certain of that. Now, wait"—as Ching was about to interrupt—"the thing is that they are stuck in Marseilles. There's only one train out tonight, Jurg says, and that's to Lyon. Nedry doesn't want to go there. All of a sudden she's in a hurry to get back home. Of course, she ties that to the news of the Allied landing, but it isn't so. If it wasn't for the diary she's snitched, she'd want to go to Berne, or Geneva, and stay in the thick of things. Nedry's no homelover."

"That sounds pretty solid."

"How would it be if we took them along with us tonight —if they'd go?"

"But would they—if they really had the book?" queried Ching doubtfully. "Won't they scent a trick to get it back?"

"Could be. Nedry thinks she's outsmarted us, though, and I put on a four-forty act of assuming the Gestapo had the old man's diary and that that was that."

"You believe you've outsmarted Nedry, then?" Ching's little smile was creeping into the corners of his mouth.

"You told me once it was dangerous to think you have outslicked another person—that this would be when you're most likely to overplay your hand. I'm a good pupil."

"I hope you are." Ching didn't seem sure of it.

"I am! I thought the best way to convince Nedry that I didn't suspect her of anything was not to be interested in what became of the diary. I didn't ask questions and kept the subject on getting away from Marseilles." Val thought for a moment, then continued: "There wouldn't be any harm in asking them to come along with us, would there? If they refused, then we'd be more certain than ever who sneaked the book from your room."

"You're strangely eager now to get it back," observed Ching.

"You forget that I've gone all-out against the Nazis." There was no lightness in her tone as she said this. "I've really waked up to what a mess they've got the world into. Count me in, brother."

"You're counted. All right, Val, ask them along—it won't hurt anything, either way. But I don't seem to trust Nedry and Sampson as perhaps one should—considering they're fellow

Americans."

"Being an American doesn't always mean a right guy," commented Val impatiently.

"I'm afraid you're right. Now, here's what you do: Tell them I have located a boat to take us to Spain—you needn't mention any way stops. You don't know where the boat is and I'm not telling you—because I don't know myself at this minute. Nedry and Jurg can pack their stuff as though to catch this train to Lyon. When they leave the hotel, I'll have a carriage waiting. The driver will have—let's see—a red ribbon tied around his whip, for identification. They'll get in—and from then on they'll have to trust to me."

"It'll be a long drive, if they have to keep it up from ten until three a.m.," observed Val. "The poor horse!"

"They can take in the show at the Abbaye meanwhile."

"Lugging their bags? You don't think they will leave them anywhere for you to search, do you?"

"They'd hardly risk carrying the diary in their luggage. If they have it, it will be concealed somewhere on his or her person. That wouldn't be too difficult."

"I did it," agreed Val.

Ching nodded absently and glanced at his watch. "Probably I'll think of some other way for them to spend the interval," he said. "It's almost two now. You'd better get out of this joint and back to the hotel. I'll have to know pretty soon whether to send the carriage or not. Luis will take you back, then hang around in the street in front of the Dijon. If they agree to come with us, drape that black shawl you wore home last night out of a window. He'll see it and report."

"Suppose they don't? Luis won't want to hang around all afternoon."

"In that case, hang something else—some color."

"The remains of the white evening dress I wore last night," suggested Val, bitterly recalling the ruined gown. "It will be its last bow."

Ching found Luis sleeping in a cubbyhole of a room under the stairs. He escorted Val as far as the Cannebière, then left her with the assurance that he would pass the hotel from time to time until he saw her signal.

Val entered the hotel through the regularly ordained entrance. The lobby was still a center of excited chatter about the news from Africa, apparently feeding on the wildest rumors. Corporal Fleber, at his post near the entrance, stared at her with surprise in his usually impassive face as she entered. Apparently he had been waiting there for her to go out. Val smiled triumphantly at him as she passed, but he made no effort to detain her.

Beyond a group of excitedly talking Frenchmen, she sighted the tall figure of Captain Tilsen, with his agent, Schlegel. Val ducked her head and scurried toward the elevator, hoping the German wouldn't see her—a little afraid of him now—but she didn't get away with it. Tilsen, shifting his position, caught sight of her and moved away from the screening group to intercept. "Good afternoon," he said, blocking her path. "I've been looking for you."

"If it's about a job you'll have to see my agent," she returned in a feeble attempt at playfulness.

"It's about that bit of artifice you had me for," he answered, apparently not at all annoyed. "You are not so naïve as I'd imagined, Miss Bright. Only you should have realized that Colonel von Stamm would come running to me to learn if I really had the diary—as he did about a half hour ago."

"Are you part British?" Val asked, more interested in his clinging to English vernacular than in what he was saying. She'd anticipated that development.

"Remotely," he replied. "And I had part of my education there. But, as I was saying—"

"You have found where the diary is," interrupted Val, as though bored with the subject. "Well, all right—where is it?"

"I have not." Tilsen's expression lost some of its studied blandness. "But I shall, from either you or that correspondent friend of yours. My staff is engaged in searching for him, but if we have not located Dillon before morning, you'll have to substitute for him on a journey to Paris. That'll bring him to the surface, I fancy—and the diary, too."

"What right have you to do anything like that?" demanded Val furiously.

"My ability to do so exceeds any ethical consideration, my

dear," he answered loftily. "The New Order concerns itself with the success of its aims—not the means of achieving them."

"So does any other thief!"

"We prefer to draw a parallel with the Americans helping themselves to whatever the Indians possessed. Later, when we have what we desire, we may subscribe to your present-day morality."

Val decided she was getting into deeper water than she was equipped to wade in. She'd better get back to the more familiar shallows. Better still if she stopped talking altogether and went on to the elevator. The little Frenchman was peering at her with concern in his wizened face from the door of the car.

"All right!" Val conceded. "Let it be like that: a hundred years ago we weren't any better than you are now. Another *hundred* might see some improvement in German decency, but I doubt it."

Tilsen merely chuckled. "Part of me terribly resents that last remark," he said. "The Saxon part; the Anglo portion might agree with you, if it weren't a puerile strain, decadent and deteriorating."

"I'll dash upstairs and look up some hard words," returned Val. "Then come back and go on with this game of 'insult, insult, who's got an insult?'"

She evaded the hand he put out to detain her with a dancing motion which took her around the side he hadn't expected her to go, then laughed back at him over her shoulder as she sped to the elevator. Tilsen came after her in long strides, but Val was inside the car before he could overtake her. The operator crashed the grille shut in his face and started the car.

"That one again!" he exclaimed. "Mademoiselle does not admire this *boche, hein?*"

"Not any *boche,* m'sieu," returned Val, breathless.

"That is well. They have brought much sorrow to France, these savages."

"France will be happy again, though."

The little veteran looked doubtful. "We French aren't able to endure happiness for very long. Once we have it we soon find politicians to take it from us. We have been kingdom, empire, and republic, again and again, each to be destroyed in

the space of one man's lifetime."

Val remembered something Ching had once said: "Don't look back when you're trying to move forward." She offered it as her own for the Frenchman's benefit as she left the elevator.

Pausing for a moment in the corridor, she listened for the sound of anyone coming up the stairway, half fearful that Tilsen would come charging up after her. She didn't want him to know that she was going to Nedry's room, didn't want him to suspect that she even knew the newswoman. Of course, Schlegel might have told him this, but Val didn't believe the Gestapo agent would have gone into much detail concerning his misadventure.

Nedry admitted her with more graciousness than before. Evidently she had been out, as she was dressed for the street even to the new hat she had been fashioning. It looked rather well on her, Val decided after a quick appraisal. Just a little rakish, but quite in Nedry's style. Jurg Sampson was stretched out on the couch, but he swung his feet to the floor and got up as the dancer entered.

"I've seen Ching!" exclaimed Val, coming on into the room. "There's a boat sailing for the Spanish coast at about three a.m. that we're to leave on. Not a very good boat—and it's all hush-hush—but Ching says it will do the trick. You're invited!"

"Really?" Nedry had a nonplussed moment, searching the dancer's face for a lead.

"Unless you've decided to go on to Lyon—or to Arles—and trust to luck to get you away from France," amended Val. "Perhaps that *would* be better."

"I don't know—" murmured Nedry, hesitantly. She slashed a glance at Jurg, who appeared to be digesting Val's invitation.

Val decided her cue was now to discourage acceptance. "I think it's going to be a pretty uncomfortable trip," she said. "I guess it would be best to go by train. Anyhow, I thought I'd tell you." She turned toward the door as though her mission had been performed in extending the invitation and she wasn't so very enthusiastic about its acceptance.

"Wait a minute, Val," Jurg called to her. "Where's this boat to leave from?"

"I don't know," replied Val. "And I won't know until I am

aboard. It's a military secret."

"That's helpful—if we decide to come along." Jurg essayed a grin which didn't come out properly. "How are we supposed to find it?"

Val gave the directions Ching had given her to transmit, in case they accepted his offer.

"Underground stuff," said Nedry distastefully. "I don't go for that kind of business—too dangerous."

"This isn't," disagreed Val. "But I didn't really think you would. It was just that we don't like leaving people we know stuck in Marseilles. Not cricket, Ching says, but I believe he was a little bothered, too, at the idea of anyone coming with us." She laughed softly, as though she had informed on him.

"Damned decent of him," declared Jurg, but his eyes were crafty. "What do you say, Nedry, shall we take him up?"

"I still don't know," returned Lotus. "It's all so vague."

"Well, I can see why it has to be that way," admitted Jurg, moving away from the couch restlessly and bringing up at the table where he stood tapping his fingers on the polished wood surface. He lifted his chin in abrupt decision. "I'm for doing it. God knows when we can get away from this damned town —and where we'll land if we do."

"I think the boat is probably small and unsatisfactory," suggested Val. She shrugged. "But if you can take it—"

"We can!" snapped Nedry, succumbing to the needling. "And will."

Val assumed a thoughtful expression to cover her glee. "Umm!" she remarked ambiguously.

"Atta pal!" congratulated Jurg, obviously relieved at Nedry's decision. "We're to be ready to travel at ten, eh?"

"Correct." Val ran through Ching's directions again and Jurg repeated them.

"We'll be there," he declared firmly.

In her own room, Val got out the black shawl and hung it over the sill of a window facing the Rue Limoges. Then she saw Luis examining the contents of the window of the small stationery shop with the air of one who hasn't anything save time on his hands. She waited until he finally turned his head and glanced up at the façade of the hotel. There was no indi-

cation that he'd observed anything of the slightest interest, but Val knew that he had seen the shawl. He turned and strolled slowly out of the short street to disappear at the corner into the Cannebière.

Chapter Twenty: FINAL PERFORMANCE

AT NINE Val left the hotel to go to the Abbaye, after listening a moment at Nedry's door to make sure that the newswoman was still there with Sampson.

Attendance at the Abbaye evidently had suffered from the news of the day, Val observed while passing through to the door leading to the backstage area. Legarde hadn't been on hand to meet her, either, and the dancer thought he probably was in his office. She didn't mind, as she had no desire to see him, but went on down to her dressing-room. There wasn't any too much time to prepare for her act, anyway.

Legarde was standing in the wings when Val came back upstairs, watching the act which preceded hers, but very apparently not thinking about it. His massive head rolled around on his shoulders as she joined him with a softly spoken greeting.

"Ah—my small one!" He bowed slightly. "You are of the faithful! I imagined that you had fled with the others."

"I flee tomorrow," she said, glancing around to see if anyone was near enough to overhear. Two men standing a few yards away in the passage, leaning against the wall, were obviously not stage hands and were displaying furtive interest in her. She raised her voice a tone. "It was impossible to get away today, but I expect to be able to tomorrow. So I thought I might as well come here tonight."

"Had you not, I would have understood," he answered slowly. "My regret that you must leave is very great, Mademoiselle. Perhaps—in happier times—"

"I shall never return to Europe," interrupted the girl firmly. "That I understand as well."

The chanteuse was coming off and Val moved nearer the entrance, partially to reassure the orchestra leader that she was on hand. She saw le Clairon's dark face in the pit, his head turned toward her. He nodded briefly and his attention re-

turned to his work.

"I will see you before you leave tonight," Legarde said.

Val barely heard him, fully occupied with what she had to do. War or peace, a dancer doesn't like to mess up her entrance. On the cue she moved out into sight of the audience, falling easily and naturally into the routine of her dance. The performances already given had brought all the intricacies into proper sequence and rhythm, a large help since dancing didn't occupy its usual spot in her mind just then.

She found herself wondering about Nedry and Sampson and what Ching was doing about picking them up for the voyage. That this action added something to the hazard of the enterprise she didn't doubt, but she believed her suspicions of the pair made it worth while. A few more hours would tell the story. Once clear of Marseilles they could just keep on running and hiding until safety was reached. Every minute they remained was potentially dangerous. The Gestapo had threatened to take her back to Paris, or Ching—

A swift turn brought her momentarily into a position facing the side of the stage from which she had made her entrance—and she almost tripped herself in quick alarm. The lanky figure of Captain Tilsen stood in the wings watching her, with three other men crowding behind him. Two of these were the men she had seen before going on.

Catching herself, she went into a wide turn which brought her almost down to the footlights and thence across to the other side of the stage. Passing le Clairon, she saw he was staring excitedly up at her and as their eyes met he jerked his head toward the wings where Tilsen stood.

For a second Val thought the director meant for her to conclude the dance and exit, but as the number would be finished anyhow in less than another minute, he couldn't have meant that. She made several more turns, short ones, managing a fleeting glance toward the group in the wings, then reaching a point near le Clairon shot him an inquiring look.

"Gestapo!" she heard him exclaim. "Dance on—I repeat!"

Despite legs that seemed to have gone completely out of control, knees that wanted to tremble instead of what they were supposed to do, Val carried on. Fighting down her panic,

she passed the Gestapo agent again, this time contriving a more extended look at him. There was no trace of his usual bland cordiality now, just the cold-eyed patience of a cat waiting for an expected mouse.

Trouble, she knew, merely waited her exit. Perhaps they had taken Ching and had now decided to gather her into their net also. Dancing downstage again, her mind desperately concentrated to find escape, her eyes sought le Clairon again. She saw his lips move. She was forced to improvise another turn to bring her closer. Her straining ears then caught his words: "Upstage—center—upstage center!"

She circled around to the opposite side, trying to interpret his command. The stage, she knew, had no entrance on this side and even if she made an exit there was only a blank wall beyond. Le Clairon had ordered her upstage, center. Why?

Perhaps she would find out if she obeyed. Certainly she could not keep on dancing much longer and a dive over the footlights would most likely result in a broken arm or leg. Conscious that her dancing was deteriorating to the point where it could hardly be called dancing at all, she turned toward the center of the stage. Reaching it, she altered her direction toward the backdrop, behind which she believed to be only a blank wall. Still, there might have been some sort of opening through it she hadn't noticed previously. There had to be. "Upstage—center"—that was what le Clairon had hissed at her!

Unconsciously her pace slowed down. She was nearing the backdrop, and now she realized that this itself would prevent her reaching any opening in the wall if there was one. She turned her head quickly to look back at the orchestra leader, and as she did so he disappeared from sight beyond the outer rim of the stage.

Every light on the stage went out with blinding suddenness. Val stopped, bewildered, then without warning felt herself falling through the stygian blackness. A startled scream died in her throat as she landed on something soft, first on her hands and knees, then sprawling. Something above made a chugging sound, and the lights came on.

Val, about as frightened as she had ever been in her life, looked around swiftly to discover that she was in the room be-

neath the stage—a dusty, prop-filled space—with Luis's strong hands trying to help her to her feet. The sound she'd heard was the closing trap in the stage overhead.

"Quick, Señorita, the Gestapo have come for you!" Luis exclaimed.

Val scrambled from the pile of mattresses left for the use of some preceding act and got to her feet. Luis gripped her wrist and started for an archway at the end of the room. It was useless to ask questions as she ran along at his side, struggling to subdue her terrorized nerves. Queerly, she had recovered a mental equilibrium, but physical co-ordination lagged. Beyond the arch they crossed a room piled with old baggage, then found themselves in the corridor leading to the dressing-rooms. Sounds from upstairs indicated considerable running about.

Val saw her hatbox and cloak at the side of the stairway. Luis must have gathered up her things before he came for her, she thought, as he picked up these articles without hesitating. Then he started up the stairs, walking softly. Val followed, with an equal effort at silence, and they reached the head of the passage leading past the entrance to the wings.

Luis, however, had no intention of trying to escape that way. Several men could be seen at the other end of the dimly lighted passage, effectually blocking it. The Spanish boy went around the stairway into another short hall beyond. At the end of this a door opened into what had once been the abbot's garden, now filled with a tangled thicket of dead shrubbery and dry grass.

In the dim light from windows bordering the opposite side of the rectangular plot Val identified the old chapter house which Legarde now used as his office. Apparently there were no windows in this and at least on this side no entrance into the garden. Luis struck off toward the opposite wall, the hatbox thumping against his legs.

"Are we safe now?" whispered Val, her voice shaky.

Luis made a sign for silence and kept on. They reached the abutting building and now Val could see a latticework extending some distance up the wall, partially covered with vines.

"Can you climb this to the first window?" he whispered, stopping. He reached out and shook the lattice as though to show her it was secure.

"If I have to!" she chattered.

She reached up and found a place for her hands on one of the crosspieces. Thrusting a toe into an open place she pulled herself up about a foot, groping with one hand for a higher hold. She was glad she wasn't encumbered with a dress, although the dead twigs scratched her half-clad body.

She wasn't more than a yard from the ground when the sound of voices almost caused her to lose her hold and precarious footing. Men were coming from the door they had just left and rushing through the bushes toward her.

Luis snapped around. "Be brave, Señorita—I shall not fail you!" he exclaimed, and before Val could reply he was off along the wall in the deeper shadows.

Val made a desperate, terrified effort to climb higher, but failed. This latticework could not be climbed in a hurry without danger of falling back into the yard. She gasped as she felt hands gripping her ankles, not gently, and a moment later found herself sprawling on the grass, surrounded by three men. One of them laughed harshly as he dragged her to her feet. "So you would run away?" he growled. "I think you shall come with us to Captain Tilsen instead."

Val didn't think it would be any use to argue. She stood watching the men with a despairing calm, not pinning much faith in Luis's ability to extricate her from this situation. There were too many of these Gestapo thugs for one boy and perhaps a couple of his friends to cope with, while Ching was now probably nowhere near the Abbaye.

"Well, why not?" she answered. "If he insists on seeing me."

They took no chances, and with a man on each side marched her back across the garden and then on to Legarde's office. One of them brought her hatbox and cloak. Captain Tilsen, occupying the chair at Legarde's desk, greeted her with a saturnine smile. "Good evening, Miss Bright," he said, crisply. "Sorry to disturb your plans, but we couldn't let you go away without first giving up the general's valuable book."

"How many times do I have to tell you I haven't it?"

"But you are aware of where it is hidden. Well, no matter—we will come to that later. You are returning to your dear Paris tomorrow, as I promised." He leaned forward on the desk and

began to fill his pipe. He looked up as she did not speak. "But you shall not be alone on the trip. Your dear friend, Mr. Dillon, will accompany you."

"He didn't tell me," returned Val with defiant sarcasm.

Tilsen smiled vacantly. "He will be along in a few moments. We have arranged for him to hear of what has happened to you. That will fetch him, I believe." He glanced significantly at Legarde, standing against the wall, but what the café owner was thinking of could never be learned from his face.

Faint sounds of music could be heard in the silence that followed. Apparently the show had continued after Val had made her fruitless attempt to escape. A woman's voice singing then joined with the music, and Val recognized it as that of the woman whose act she had followed the night before. Fine time to be thinking about that, she thought grimly, and her gaze floated back to Tilsen. "Taking us both back to Paris will never get the diary for you," she said, "since that doesn't leave anyone to get it for you."

"Once we learn where it is, we'll attend the matter of recovering it."

Val, concentrating on an effort to discover some plausible hindrance to Tilsen's idea, heard footsteps in the walled-in corridor joining this office to the building proper. She lifted her head inquiringly, swinging around toward the entrance, and then her heart sank as she saw Ching Dillon stride into the office.

Val was puzzled for a moment at the lack of escorting Germans, and then relief cooled her excitement, based on nothing more substantial than Ching's air of forthright anger.

"Now what have you been doing, Captain Tilsen?" he demanded, stopping at the desk.

Tilsen smiled cynically, glancing at the three Gestapo men standing about in the small room, each with a hand on the butt of his automatic. "Waiting for you, old fellow," replied Tilsen. "Now that you are here, we can get on with the business of taking you and Miss Bright back to Paris. We shall give you the rare treat of a long motorcar ride."

"You only think you will," returned Ching curtly and with amazing confidence. "Another thing which has always been

curious to me: why does Heinrich Himmler pick such stupid fools to carry out his work? I mean you."

Tilsen, pricked, leaped to his feet, roaring. "So I am a stupid fool? We shall see what your opinion is after a sojourn at Dachau."

"I have no plans for visiting that delightful resort," said Ching calmly. "But I have called you a stupid fool. Now I shall tell you why. Listen!"

The room became still. As though from some distance Val heard the orchestra again, and the woman singing. It was *The Marseillaise* she sang. Other voices, male ones, began to join hers, swelling into a considerable chorus.

"What nonsense—" began Tilsen, irritated.

"I said listen."

The singing abruptly stopped, followed by the voice of a man speaking, but the words were unintelligible.

"I have no time for—"

"Shut up!" snapped Ching. "I have contracted to show you what a complete ass you are. Be still!"

Almost as Ching finished the orchestra crashed back into the song again, much louder, accompanied by a rising tumult of shouts which did not die away. A worried expression began to flood into Tilsen's face and he turned abruptly to Legarde. "What is this, Legarde?" he demanded. "What is going on out there?"

"Let me tell you, since Legarde doesn't know," interjected Ching. "The sounds you are hearing are not a dirge for long-dead friars, but a requiem mass for you and your thick-skulled stooges. Only a very stupid fool of a German secret agent would have brought his men into Old Harbor. Tomorrow fresh corpses will be fished from the water of the harbor. They will have once spoken German."

"You forget we are well armed," growled Tilsen, patting a bulge under his coat. "We can attend any situation."

"A half dozen of you—six hundred Frenchmen, who are also not without weapons!" Ching laughed raspingly. "Monsieur Legarde will verify that."

Tilsen again shot a worried look at the Frenchman, who had not stirred from his position at the wall. "What about this,

Legarde?"

The café owner lifted his huge shoulders in a shrug. The shouting in the café reached a new and higher level and there were indications that the crowd wasn't just sitting at the tables.

"You will remember that I advised against this when you came here tonight," Legarde replied. "Now it is too late for my opinion to have worth. There is but a moment to wait for proof of what Monsieur Dillon has just told you."

Captain Tilsen decided not to wait for even the moment. He started toward the corridor. "Bring those two persons with you, Zimmerman!" he barked at one of his men. "We shall take them through the back—"

He came opposite and close to Ching, breaking off his speech as something thrust against his side, something Ching held in his hand.

"Tilsen, must I blow your insides out?" lashed Ching's voice. The German, now in front of the correspondent, halted precipitately, his eyes enlarged in horrified surprise. "Or will you command your men to drop their weapons?"

Tilsen didn't consider the choice. In a guttural snarl—a departure from his customary tone—he ordered his assistants to disarm. Three automatics clattered to the floor with a celerity that indicated a strong willingness in the minds of these worried agents to co-operate. Ching jerked Tilsen around and removed a Mauser pistol from a sling under his coat, then went to the door. "Legarde—lock these men securely in this room." Ching eyed the Frenchman speculatively. "It is for their own protection, of course."

"Naturally," agreed Legarde, setting his bulky figure into motion. "It would give me sorrow if they were killed here. Besides, it would be very bad for my business."

Someone was pounding on the door. Ching pulled it open and with a quick movement thrust himself outside. Val heard him speaking rapidly, then he returned.

"Come on, Val, we must be going," he said. "Your only chance of getting out of this alive, Tilsen, is to remain quietly in this room until the word gets around that you have escaped. That will take some time."

Captain Tilsen sat down heavily in the desk chair, glaring

with baleful impotence at Ching. Val pulled the cloak around her, picked up the hatbox, and then walked out without another glance at the discomfited Gestapo chief. She felt cold, chilled with the ordeal she had just gone through, and in no mood to triumph over a frustrated opponent.

Ching, motioning Legarde to precede him into the hall, then followed, kicking the automatics into the passage as he moved toward the doorway. Val, watching him as he closed the door, became conscious of someone at her side and, turning quickly, discovered Luis, watching her somberly.

"I did not fail you, Señorita," he said.

Val touched his hand as he took the hatbox from her and smiled as warmly as her state of nerves permitted. Legarde locked his office door under Ching's supervision and began a ponderous farewell. He extended his enormous hand to Val and when she took it, reluctantly, he pressed a packet of francs into her palm. She stepped back, turning her hand to see what it was. "Your salary for tonight," he said.

"But—I couldn't take it!" she exclaimed. "I haven't earned it."

His thick lips moved in a smile. "The Germans are coming to Marseilles," he said. "They will help themselves, and francs will have no value. Perhaps you will sometime have a kind thought for a Frenchman whose courage was not enough."

With Ching and Luis clearing a way through to the café, Val was amazed to find there no signs of an incipient riot. Instead, the patrons were sitting quietly at their tables, watching with indifference the antics of two girls presumably executing a dance routine on the stage.

"But, Ching!" she exclaimed softly. "I thought there was a crazy mob out here—"

He laughed. "Just a small-sized community sing, pigeon," he said. "I arranged with le Clairon to stage the *Marseillaise* bit—that's all it takes to get these lads going. He threw in a pep talk on his own, I think."

"They didn't know what was going on in the office?"

"Of course they didn't. That was just a royal flush in bluff—although we were prepared to make it real if Tilsen had been stubborn."

Val wanted to know more about the affair than this, but decided to wait until they were clear of the Abbaye. The trio reached the street and hurried along through the darkness until they reached the red-wheeled barouche. They piled in and the carriage started off into the dark and sinister reaches of the Old Harbor, Val sitting between the two men.

"That was an inspiration," she said abruptly.

"What was?" queried Ching.

"The stage show you put on—the riot scene."

A low chuckle came from Ching. "You can thank le Clairon for most of the inspiration," he replied. "He became worried when he saw the Gestapo in the wings and sent for Luis, who was waiting for me in the room you discovered by falling into it. I arrived just after you and Luis had beat it, but by the time I got the low-down on what had happened, it was too late to chase after you. Then we didn't know how badly the scheme had worked out until Luis came back to report that Tilsen had grabbed you."

"I hid in the bushes and then followed you back in, Señorita," supplemented the boy.

"Dulonne arrived through the door to the orchestra pit, and we had a quick consultation of war, resulting in the *Marseillaise* idea of stirring up the crowd while I went to the office to try and scare Tilsen. Meanwhile Dulonne went out to bring real enforcements, if needed. You see, we were determined that Tilsen wasn't to leave with you, even if we had a pitched battle."

"Makes me feel awful important," Val said.

"You are all of that, sweet."

"Just the same, I'm glad there was no fight. I was scared enough as it was."

"It was much better," agreed Ching. "For what would have come later would not have been so simple. The Nazis are coming to Marseilles—and if Tilsen and the others had been killed, a fearful retribution would have been exacted. As it is, no one will be hurt."

"They will sit in terrified silence for some hours before Legarde lets them out," said Luis, "believing that the next moment will bring a mob to the office door."

That reminded Val of Nedry and Sampson. While all this

had been going on, what had become of them? Ching told her that their guests were waiting in a safe place he had provided near where the fishing-boat was to be boarded.

The carriage had now entered the same dingy way that Val had traversed the night before on her way to find the Rue Chevennes, and the memory of it sent her wilting against Ching. The excitement she had been through had left her drained of her last reserve of fortitude.

"Oh, Ching, will we ever get out of this mess?" she wailed. "Baby can't take much more!"

"We'll get out all right," he replied confidently. "With flying colors."

He slipped his arm around her, pulled her close, and lightly kissed the top of her head. She sighed deeply. One thing about Ching Dillon, she thought, he made you feel secure when you knew very well you were not.

Two hours later, Corporal Otto Fleber leaned on the parapet of the Quai de la Tourette beyond old Fort St. Jean, smoking a very bad cigar and watching the searchlight from another fort across the narrow entrance as it played over the fleet of fishing-boats which sailed from the Old Harbor every morning. His attention seemed directed at one boat in particular, so much so that he brought out a pair of binoculars to follow its progress to the open sea beyond the jetty. Then he put the glass away and hurried away toward the Byzantine pile that was the Cathedral Marie-Majeure.

A little while after this Fleber was sitting in a comfortable chair in the lobby of the Hotel Dijon, deserted at this hour, smoking with the air of one who intends shortly to go to bed. His eyes, however, continually flickered toward the hotel entrance, and then, after the time it takes to smoke half of a long cigar, his interest in the doorway was gratified by the lanky figure of Captain Tilsen entering. The Gestapo agent wore the expression of a man who'd suffered a damaging blow to his self-esteem. Fleber got up to intercept him, Tilsen's eyes narrowing suspiciously as he saw the corporal.

"Our birds have flown, Captain," Fleber said.

"So I supposed," growled Tilsen, slowing his pace. "Did you see them leave?"

"Yes—certainly."

Tilsen halted abruptly, facing the corporal. "And you did nothing to stop them?"

Fleber gestured. "I am not equipped for such odds."

"How did they go—by train?"

The corporal shook his head. "A barouche with red wheels took them away from Café Abbaye," he said. "But I do not doubt they had a better method planned to reach the Spanish frontier."

"What do you suggest?"

"You have agents in every city between here and Port-Vendres, haven't you?"

"Naturally—and they shall be warned to keep a sharp lookout for these damned Americans." Captain Tilsen began walking toward the stairway again. "It was only by an extraordinary effort that I have avoided being murdered with my men tonight."

"I warned you of the dangers in the Old Harbor, Captain."

Tilsen ignored that, but spoke over his shoulder as he strode along, a new thought occurring to him. "What is Colonel von Stamm going to do when he learns of this? Return to Paris?"

Fleber, falling behind, smiled crisply. "I think in all probability he will tag along after you. He is, like his father, a very stubborn man and does not give up so easily."

Chapter Twenty-One: THE ROAD TO PERPIGNAN

A BIG MERCEDES, painted in the dismal color of war, sped westward from Marseilles, contemptuous of miles as a profligate with time. Slumped behind the wheel, in the manner of one who has far to drive, was Corporal Otto Fleber, and at his side Colonel von Stamm, the latter apparently suffering from an application of early rising.

"I wish I had greater confidence in what you propose," grumbled von Stamm, twisting into a fresh if not more comfortable position in his seat.

"Naturally," replied Fleber laconically, not taking his eyes from the road ahead. "But what alternative is there? Nothing—except an ignominious return to Paris with a report of failure

—a report which would not be well received by your illustrious father."

"He was a fool!" von Stamm exploded, without regard for filial respect. "Only an old idiot would have kept such a record!"

"It may be well if we keep our attention to repairing your father's indiscretions," Fleber replied mildly.

"That is correct, Corporal," assented von Stamm with a grunt.

"We have not used too much intelligence so far," Fleber went on. He meant "you" instead of "we"—but that would have been tactless. "We have tried at once to be devious and direct. It was not the way."

"You will explain."

"We should have been more circumspect until we knew positively where the diary was," Fleber said. "On the train we supposed it was in the girl's luggage—or that she had it with her. It seems that she did not, but meanwhile we made it definitely clear to her who and what we were. Now it occurs to me we should have remained silent until she was asleep to examine her bags."

"But I did," growled von Stamm.

"Only until we thought she was asleep—and this after arousing her suspicions of us. That was our first mistake—and all the others can be traced to this."

Colonel von Stamm scowled. It was not his nature to ignore even a veiled accusation of his own shortcomings. "Continue."

"It would have been excellent if this first episode had resulted in success," Fleber went on, unmoved by his superior's bad humor. "But it did not. In Marseilles, Miss Bright found allies to help her. We were still but two. There was also the Gestapo to contend with—and I believe their instructions were to be no less active than we in this mission. Since your father is Army and not Party—"

"Is it useful to consider that?" interrupted the colonel, finding this trend distasteful.

"It is not," admitted Fleber readily. "Nothing I have been saying is constructive, Colonel von Stamm—any more than the thought that a review of past mistakes might result in their not being repeated. In brief, I suggest that our operations now

be confined to a frontal attack."

"I am not too certain of your assumption that these people will next appear in Port-Vendres, waiting an opportunity to escape into Spain."

"We learned this morning that the frontier has been closed. So that it will be entirely natural that they will be held up there, waiting for it to reopen."

Von Stamm nodded, but since Fleber's gaze was intent on the road before him, he wasn't aware of it.

"Why Port-Vendres? There are other entries into Spain. By way of Toulouse there are two main-line railways."

"When pressed for time, one takes the straightest and quickest route," replied Fleber. "Therefore, I regard Port-Vendres as the most convenient escape hatch."

"And if they appear, as you hope?"

"Then we must have a plan ready."

"You have formed such a plan?"

"Yes, Herr Colonel. It is this: It will be necessary to remove them from any possible contact with the French underground—which is too numerous for us to cope with. All of these cities and towns are well organized by them."

Colonel von Stamm stared thoughtfully at the long road ahead. "Why do these men give themselves to Dillon's private enterprise?" he demanded.

"I can't give an answer founded on knowledge," replied Fleber. "But I believe the diary is only one item in this Dillon's program. There is probably another, of greater importance to his underground friends."

His companion considered this for a moment, then nodded affirmation. "The thought has logic," he said, with a keen side glance at the impassive corporal. "I must admit it had not occurred to me."

Fleber kept to his purposeful speech. "When we have again come into contact, I submit we should help them to escape into Spain by some little known trail across the mountains."

"Have you lost your wits?" demanded von Stamm, shocked at the suggestion. "We—help them to escape—"

"Appear to help them," amended Fleber hastily. "Before the war I was sent into these parts to gather knowledge of the ter-

rain—and the inhabitants. Perhaps the General Staff was preparing plans for possible use from the findings of myself and others. In any event—it is well for us that I now have this information."

Von Stamm stared frankly at his aide with an entirely new interest in his cold eyes. "How is it that a man of your intelligence has never risen above the rank of corporal?" he asked. "I would have thought—"

A crisp smile flickered in the corners of Fleber's mouth and he flashed a quick glance at the officer. "There are corporals—and corporals—Herr Colonel," he said, and quickly went on with what he had been unfolding. "I propose to find a trustworthy guide—trustworthy to us—who will undertake to lead these people into Spain. He will, in fact, take them to a prearranged rendezvous with us, remote from interference by either Dillon's friends—or the Gestapo."

"What then?"

"Then will be the moment to recover the diary," stated Fleber. "Up to the moment when they expect to cross into Spain, it has been too easily possible for others to transport the book for them. That, I believe, is one reason why we have not been successful. It has not always been in their possession, particularly in the last couple of days. But when the moment is at hand for them to leave France, they will risk carrying it themselves."

"Then—at this rendezvous in the Pyrenees—"

"Will come the time to abandon the circuitous approach for the direct. Having maneuvered them into a position where aid is not to be expected, it should be simple to produce results through force. We shall have the advantage of surprise, and as between equal forces, this usually wins. When you have taken what you want, they may continue on their journey."

Colonel von Stamm's eyes enlarged with quick stubbornness. "I have no intention of permitting them to escape!" he exclaimed, with a snort for punctuation.

"As you prefer," returned Fleber equably. "I had believed that after having retrieved the diary, you would not care to be troubled with their custody. Particularly"—his words became more widely spaced and pointed—"as this would be to

advertise to the Gestapo the success of our mission."

The colonel did not answer immediately, his expression revealing concentration on this new contingency. It wasn't easy for him to adjust himself to it, as it is seldom characteristic for a German to adopt an alternate plan not previously studied.

"That is correct, corporal!" he exclaimed after a time. "Naturally, since this is your idea, you have had time for more thorough consideration than I. Nothing is to be gained by dragging them back to Paris."

"I'm sure you are right," answered Fleber, now as if the whole project had come from von Stamm.

"We will keep on to Port-Vendres," the colonel continued, uninterested in the corporal's agreement. "Do you suppose Dillon may have already arrived there?"

"It makes small difference if he has," Fleber answered. "In any case, with the frontier closed, he can have gone no farther. If I may suggest, however, we could spend the night in Perpignan. There is a man, a Spaniard, Jaime Riego, whom I must locate—and he is most likely to be found there."

"Jaime Riego? I do not know the name."

"He is the man I need to guide Dillon and the girl into our hands!"

Colonel von Stamm leaned forward, plucked the lighter from the dash, and applied it to his cigarette. "Tonight, then, we shall stay in Perpignan," he said, adding with a heavy attempt at subtlety, "A pity I cannot have this American girl to entertain me. Still, I understand the place is not entirely without interest."

Leaving von Stamm installed in the best suite of the Hotel Provence with an expressed yearning for suitable female company, Corporal Fleber left on his mission of finding the Spaniard, Riego. An hour later he returned, to find the colonel comfortably reclining in bed with a bottle of wine and cigarettes in easy reach on a bedside table—but unhappily alone.

"Well?" demanded von Stamm as Fleber stopped at the foot of the bed and saluted smartly. "You have been successful?"

"I have located the man I spoke of," he said, "and made all arrangements. Riego has agreed, for the sum of twenty-five thousand francs—in advance—to make contact with Dillon and

guide him through the mountains to Santa Marta, Spain."

"Spain?" The colonel frowned. "I do not like that. It would be best to finish our business in France, where there can be no difficulty with the authorities. I have not the free hand in Spain the Gestapo has, unfortunately."

"There will be no trouble in Santa Marta, Colonel von Stamm," asserted Fleber confidently. "The village is but a couple of kilometers from Portbou—and that is the headquarters of Colonel Deja, now commanding this part of the frontier. You are acquainted with Deja, I think."

The colonel made a wry face. "Yes. I met him in Spain during the revolution. A more loathsome creature does not exist, but he will be anxious to co-operate. You have done very well, Corporal. When does your man plan to deliver Dillon to us?"

"We will be informed when he has made his arrangements."

"You are very certain we can rely on him?" Von Stamm filled his glass from the bottle on the table, but did not offer to fill the other glass for the corporal. He was reserving that one for hoped-for eventualities.

"You may be assured that I have a keen interest in the success of my undertaking," replied Fleber evenly.

"That has been proved." The officer sank back into his pillows, replacing the glass on the table. "You may go now, and —Corporal!"

"Yes, sir."

"If you should see a likely looking woman—" He raised his eyebrows suggestively.

Fleber stiffened slightly. "You will pardon me, Colonel, but that is not one of the duties of a corporal. Good night, sir."

He saluted, spun around on his heel, and walked out of the suite.

Chapter Twenty-Two: AT THE BORDER

ARMISTICE DAY! But this wasn't in the thoughts of any of the weary, rain-soaked party that disembarked from *l'Hirondelle* after two days and nights aboard the comfortless fisherman. Sleep had been difficult for the men, but completely impossible for Val and Nedry. There had been a small cabin, but a

few minutes inside it had decided both women that the oppressive dampness on deck was preferable to the horrible stench of fish and motor oil that filled it. Jurg Sampson, for most of the voyage sunk in the dull throes of seasickness, had actually been less distressed than the others. He just didn't care.

The projected stop at Cette to replenish the fuel supply had been abandoned with the discovery that *l'Hirondelle* moved along just as rapidly under sail alone as with the motor going. Any plan Ching might have entertained of proceeding on to the Spanish coast was discarded in view of the weather and the boat's sluggish progress. He therefore had directed the captain to take the craft into the tiny seaport of Le Barcarès on the Têt River, some fifteen miles from Perpignan.

Shortly after dawn on November 11th the boat huddled among others of its species against the river bank, and not even an object of interest to the few who were aboard at this unsaintly hour. For those who had not observed the arrival, *l'Hirondelle* was just another fishing-boat and presumably had been rubbing planks with her neighbors indefinitely.

The skipper of the adjacent boat, roused from slumber when *l'Hirondelle* in drawing alongside thumped solidly against his vessel, appeared to deliver a short but explosive lecture on seamanship. Mollified to some extent by Ching, he yielded the information that the tram between the village and Perpignan had not been in operation for some time. Ching, with Luis, then set off to find some other sort of conveyance to transport the party. An hour or so later they returned with a cart attached to a horse which Val moodily fancied bore a family resemblance to Marshal Petain—and not much younger.

The rain began falling again as they jolted along the road toward Perpignan. There was a top over the vehicle, but since it was open at the sides it didn't prevent the rain from occasionally blowing in on the miserable passengers. No one in this neighborhood seemed to have been concerned about road repairs and the jar of wheels over the deep ruts was continuous.

"Now I know just how Marie Antoinette felt when they took her on that tumbrel ride," grumbled Nedry.

"Huh! At least she didn't need to worry about anything to come afterward," observed Val. "Anyhow, you are thinking of

du Barry, aren't you?"

"Why du Barry?"

"More your type." Val managed a malicious gleam.

"Cut it!" ordered Ching. "Isn't this bad enough, without having to listen to a couple of bickering females?"

"We're just trying to work up a little circulation, aren't we, Nedry?"

The newswoman smiled grimly. "Mine stopped entirely last night," she said. "It will take more than childish insults to set it going again."

"A nice warm room and a good sleep will fix you up," Jurg put in hopefully, thinking more of himself than anyone else.

"Don't be too optimistic about that, Jurg," cautioned Ching. "The chauffeur of this cart tells me Perpignan is stuffed like a sausage with refugees waiting to cross the frontier. Also that the border has been closed for two days."

Stuffed it was, too, they found on arrival. Notwithstanding this, Ching and Luis, resourceful and acquainted with the town, found quarters in a small hotel on a side street near the Citadel, operated by a Spanish-looking Madame Landais. Since it was Madame's main source of revenue to provide guides for those seeking irregular entry into Spain, and for the further reason that Luis had at various times been a considerable aid to this enterprise, she had been disposed to take the little party in.

Fortunately, too, some of her guests had, only an hour before, left for Toulouse in the hope of finding a quicker, less congested way into Spain, and their rooms were turned over to the new arrivals. The price Madame Landais exacted—despite her evident fondness for Luis—seemed based on the occupation costs of the German army.

There were three of these rooms, all adjoining and on the street side of the building. Nedry and Val each drew a room to herself, while Ching, Sampson, and Luis were to "triple up" in the remaining one. To Luis, this made little difference, as he was not in the humor for sleeping and intended to explore conditions at the frontier some twenty miles below the city. He would return sometime during the day, he promised.

It was late afternoon when Val awoke from her sleep of exhaustion. She did not feel rested for it—more as if she had

merely been unconscious all day. Her muscles were sore and her eyes stinging with the irritation of so many wakeful hours. She crawled stiffly out of bed and applied herself to the business of trying to recover some part of her usual vigor. Then she came downstairs.

She found Ching where experience had taught her he was most likely to be found indoors—in the little bar of the tavern. He was sitting alone at a table, apparently dully interested in a group of refugees across the room from where he sat. Sighting Val crossing the room, he got up, a wry expression clouding his face as a muscle or two twinged in protest.

"Did you sleep?" he asked, holding a chair for her.

"No—I just passed out," returned Val, easing herself down. "Did you?"

"All of two hours, I guess," replied Ching. "Anyone who can sleep in the same room with Jurg Sampson— This outdoor life seems to have made a saxophone of his nose!"

"Then you must feel terrible."

"Not so very. I've managed to prop up the old spirits with a bit of Madame Landais's wine. Quite a bit, in fact." He eyed the half empty bottle of Graves pleasantly. "Have some? Or would you like something to eat?"

"Eat."

"Madame has fragments of a fowl and some odds and ends of vegetables. Don't ask what else, because it's that or nothing until dinner time."

"All right," Val sighed. "But what I could do to a pot of good coffee!"

"Don't speak of it, please."

Ching signaled Madame's husband, who earned his keep, or thought he did, by waiting on table and doing whatever chores his far better half directed.

"What goes on, Ching?" Val inquired when they were alone again. "Seen anything of Nedry or Sampson?"

"No—probably they're still sleeping," he said. "At any rate, they haven't put in an appearance downstairs."

"Where is Luis?"

"He hasn't returned yet." Ching remembered that Val didn't know of the Spanish boy's plan to investigate the situation at

the frontier. He explained, adding that they were now to some extent on Luis's home grounds. The boy had spent some time around this neighborhood after the Loyalist collapse.

"I see," nodded Val, marveling at Luis's ability to do with so little sleep and rest. It was, she thought, as though some burning purpose served as a substitute, and yet he never expressed any tangible objective. There was a malaise in Luis's soul which might be eased but hardly cured through a bloody revenge on that Colonel Deja. To this she believed he had composed his future.

"I've been hanging around in here hoping Luis would be along soon," said Ching. "We haven't too much time, you know, if we're to be in Lisbon on the sixteenth. That's five days."

"It shouldn't take more than a day or so, once we cross into Spain," Val pointed out.

"We haven't crossed yet," replied Ching. "If we had, you could be in Lisbon in a couple of days. For me, it may take several. I can't travel as openly as you, my pet."

"I know. How about the diary?"

"We haven't it—so far."

"We will have," promised Val optimistically.

Ching leaned forward on his elbows, regarding Val with a serious manner he'd only shown toward her lately. She liked it, liked sharing something deeper than mere physical attraction.

"The diary isn't everything," he said. "Of course, it means a hell of a lot to me, but there is something else I haven't told you about, Val."

"There are probably lots of things you haven't told me about," she responded playfully. "That woman who lived in—"

"Oh, nuts!" Ching scowled.

"Well, all right—tell baby what you have on your mind."

Ching seemed a little baffled. "Look. This is what I want to tell you: For quite a while I've been working with Army Intelligence. The landings in Africa have changed the picture and made bigger reasons than the diary for us to get back home."

Val smiled tightly. "I knew there were bigger reasons than the diary, Ching, but up to now I thought they were me!"

Ching laughed shortly. "You're the biggest reason of all, sweet—the greatest existing for me to do anything. A man

forgets how much he loves his country, the freedom and liberty of others, when his woman is in danger. You *are* in danger, you know, and until you're safe it's hard for me to give full time to other affairs. I have something"—he patted himself over the heart—"that won't be quiet until you are out of Europe."

Rare meat for any girl! Val, no longer moved to hide behind a light and trivial front, the Broadway gesture toward anything a girl doesn't quite feel assured of, forgot the "fragments of fowl" before her. This was a new Ching. Not altogether new, since it was the man she'd often fashioned in his likeness.

"Ching, darling!"

Ching downed the remainder of his glass of wine, not looking at Val, boyishly embarrassed. His stubby forefinger kneaded his forehead in a gesture that Val recognized as indicating deliberation over how much of what he had in mind he should tell.

"For over a year," he began, "I've had this connection with G2—the Army Intelligence. My job has been to collect whatever information I could here in France which might be useful to our forces when they arrive. Not military information so much as general—the civilian situation, which of course has a military significance. There are quite a lot of us—all working independently.

"A month or so ago I began to realize my usefulness here was approaching an end. I was too well known, and too well hated by all the forces of the enemy. Then, through channels too obscure for me to know about, von Stamm's diary came into underground hands. They brought it to me and offered to help me get it to America, to spread its revelations before those half-hearted visionaries back home who believe that when the war has been won we must kiss these Nazis on both cheeks and exact a promise that they will be good children ever after!"

"They'd be good for a while, anyway," observed Val, with more optimism than she felt.

"Sure they would! They'll whine and grovel—and meanwhile plan another grand assault to conquer the world as soon as the rest of us settle down to the fleshpots of peace. Civilization can never survive another such strain—the whole fabric of human

relations will be ripped to shreds!"

Val had no mind for things beyond the present emergency, and the fleshpots he mentioned had a powerful attraction. The by-products of war, like the tragedy of Luis's sister, exerted a strong pull on her emotions, but political doctrines which brought such things about were something of which she knew little.

"I guess so," commented Val. "Anyhow, we'd better be thinking of what they'd do if they caught us, which right now is more likely."

"Correct!" Ching grinned at her in the fashion she liked. "One great thing about you, pigeon, is that you're so earthy you have a tendency to keep the Dillon feet on the ground. You certainly are ack-ack to any flights of the soul!"

"It depends a bit on where the soul is soaring. And whose soul. If it's yours—and soaring toward me—I hold my fire, don't I?"

Ching wasn't listening, but staring with a surprised expression toward the bar entrance. Val turned, assuming a similar look as she saw Bob Gregory standing in the lobby beyond the door, with a bag at his feet. He was having a very earnest discussion with Madame Landais, and apparently not doing too well.

"Bob!" Val exclaimed. "He's probably looking for a room."

"Three in my room would seem to be about all it can hold," Ching observed. Then he pushed his chair back and got up. "I'll have to see what can be done about Bob, though."

"Do!"

Ching hesitated, glancing at Val with speculation. "You wouldn't think of bunking in with Nedry—in a pinch?"

"*I* would—suit me swell. But she wouldn't."

"Guess you're right. Nedry isn't the sort to get that chummy with another woman."

Ching strode off toward the arguing Bob Gregory, so far unaware of having friends in Madame Landais's crowded hostelry. A moment or two later they both came to the table.

"Hello, Val." Gregory smiled cheerfully and dropped into the unoccupied chair. "Just another refugee, me—one more roofless waif."

"The Landais has agreed to put Bob up in the shed over her cow," Ching said, settling into his own chair.

"I've never shared quarters with a cow before. How does one act?" Bob didn't seem to relish the prospect.

"You just mind your own business, that's all," admonished Ching, chuckling. "No passes. The Landais cow wouldn't understand—she's not been around newspaper men."

"I'll be the soul of discretion. After all, she has a roof over her head, which I have not." Bob sampled Ching's wine, using Val's glass. "I just got in a couple of hours ago, and now the problem is to get on before the Germans move in from Bordeaux—or wherever they're coming from."

"Our little problem, also, but even more urgent," observed Val. "What's happened to the other lads and lassies we left in Vichy?"

"All on the lam," returned Bob. "Doll Marvin, Spencer, and Abe Steiner arrived here with me, but I don't know where they are now. Abe's a Jew, you know, and I doubt that he even lets his feet get cool in Perpignan."

"I've had everything except chilblains myself," Val said. "And now I'm no longer conscious of my feet. Dancing is their dish—not running away from things."

"Have you plans?" asked Bob. "They tell me the frontier into Spain has been closed."

"We will have plans soon," said Ching. "But you have nothing to be worried about, Bob. You're safe here until you can get away—and that shouldn't be long, either. If I know the Spaniards, they'll be opening and closing the border for days—much as the wind blows. The Nazis won't bother you, anyway, if they get here before you can leave."

"Says you!"

"They won't, really. After all, we have quite a few of their nationals interned back home, you know. They've nothing against you." Ching smiled ruefully. "But lots—too much—against me, and some of it has spilled over on my little playmate here."

Bob suppressed an earnest yawn. "Boy, am I sleepy!" he exclaimed. "I've only had an hour or so catnapping since leaving Vichy yesterday morning. What time do cows go to bed?

Do you suppose this one makes a noisy business of chewing her cud? Not that it would matter too much."

"If you can take Jurg Sampson's nose-tootling, you can catch a little shut-eye in my bed," Ching offered. "Anyway—he'll be stirring around pretty soon, I imagine. He's been asleep all day."

Ching and Bob Gregory went off to the former's one-third share in a room, leaving Val to finish lunch. Now that the first ravenings of hunger were stilled, she became more critical of the food. She didn't find wine an acceptable substitute for coffee, either. Ching found her just sitting there when he returned from upstairs.

"Finished?" he asked, sliding into the chair opposite.

"Quite," she replied. "And about the only difference I feel is that I'm not hungry now."

"Well, even that's something, the way things are." Ching poured the remainder of the wine into his glass and sat back. "Luis should be showing up before long. Then we can make definite plans for the next move. We'll need a guide to take us over the mountains, and we can't afford one of Madame Landais's staff. They come high."

"We'll be goin' round the mountain when we go," paraphrased Val, happy at the prospect of leaving trouble behind.

"Not you—that won't be necessary," Ching corrected. "You see, while I can't risk passing the frontier guards, even with phony papers, they'll not bother you when the border is open again. You can cross with Bob Gregory."

"I'd rather go with you and Luis," returned Val. "Over the mountain."

"You wouldn't like it, sweet. It has to be done on foot, you know, and the going is plenty tough in places."

"I don't like being left here, either," argued Val. "So far as walking is concerned, there's nothing wrong with my legs. I'll bet they're stronger than yours—"

"And definitely more alluring."

"I've shoes to walk in, too." Val ignored the interruption.

"Practically new, I'm thinking!" Ching laughed, a picture of Val's usual high-heeled footwear coming to mind. He'd never noticed any tendency to pedestrian activity in her—not

when there was anything to ride on.

"Practically," acknowledged the girl, smiling in spite of an effort not to. "But I *can* walk, Ching—really, I can."

Ching moved his hand in a careless gesture. "Well, we'll see what gives when Luis gets back," he said.

"I don't intend to be sidetracked like that, Mr. Ching Dillon. If you won't let me come with you, I'll go with Bob." Her eyes glistened with rising hurt. "And I shan't promise to meet you anywhere, either."

Ching was instantly distressed. "But, pigeon—"

"Bob's pretty smart, too," snapped Val relentlessly. "Besides, he's a man any girl could go for." She tried to bring an ecstatic, dreamy look into her eyes, but knew she wasn't convincing. Then she laughed. "All right, boy friend, but don't think you're going to run out on me now." She glanced toward the bar entrance as a shadow caught her eye. "And there's Luis. Who's the skinny hidalgo he's brought along with him?"

Ching turned to look and his expression broke into one of pleased surprise. He started getting out of his chair.

"That's a man I know!" he exclaimed. "A Basque named Jaime Riego—and he will certainly come in handy just now!"

Ching brought Luis and the man Riego back to the table with him and ordered a fresh bottle of wine. Val found herself examining Riego with considerable interest. He was not a prepossessing individual, his face lean to gauntness, a thin and prominent nose separating small black eyes which gleamed like jet beads. For a Spaniard, she concluded, he was singularly uninterested in women, for he gave her no more than a sharp glance as Ching presented him.

"How have things been with you, Riego?" asked Ching.

"Very good, Señor," the man answered slowly. "There have been many to guide across the frontier, so that I have earned for myself many thousands of francs. Some day there may be things I can buy with these. Just now—no!"

"We do not have so many francs, Jaime," Ching said, tentatively, "but it has become necessary for me to enter Spain once more."

Riego nodded solemnly. "Even without francs, Señor, that can be accomplished. One does not forget a certain night—

after Vinaroz."

Ching smiled at Val, still absorbed in a study of the stranger's hawklike face. "Señor Riego hid himself in the trunk compartment of my car after the Loyalist defeat there," he explained. "But I'm afraid he exaggerates the importance of the lift to Terragona."

"That would be impossible," resisted Riego. "If you had refused me, I should not be here now."

"Must have been frightfully stuffy, riding in a trunk compartment," Val observed.

Riego smiled reminiscently. "I do not recommend it," he said. "But fear of death or torture if taken prisoner eased my discomfort. There is even less air in a grave." His black eyes switched back to Ching. "When do you wish to leave Perpignan, Señor? You have but to name the time."

"We could start within the hour," replied Ching promptly. He fell silent as the waiter brought wine and filled the glasses, then went away again. "But, of course, you may not be able to make your arrangements so soon."

"Four in the morning would be better," responded Riego. "You see, Señor, it was my fortune some months ago to buy a car from an American leaving France much as you are. A very excellent car, and a great bargain. In this I shall drive you to Cèret. That is near the frontier, as you know, and we will reach it by daybreak. From a place south of Cèret we go afoot through the valleys until we arrive at Santa Marta, which is in Spain."

"Santa Marta?" broke in Luis. "That is only a few miles west of Port-Bou, is it not?"

"A mere village of half a dozen poor houses," replied Riego, looking curiously at Luis. "Port-Bou cannot be entered from France while the frontier is closed. This you know, Luis."

"I have learned today that a relative of my family is in command at Port-Bou," Luis said, absently. "One Colonel Deja—and I have the desire to meet with him."

A chill of apprehension swept through Val. She read nothing in Luis's eyes to indicate what he had in mind, but she felt a vague dread of what the Spanish boy would do if he encountered his father's cousin, and fear of the consequence to him. The sight of Deja might destroy his sanity forever.

Riego, though, obviously regarded Luis's interest in Deja as being of no importance. He glanced inquiringly at Val, then to Ching. "The Señorita—she does not come with us?"

"She certainly does!" affirmed Val. "All the way!"

Riego didn't appear at all pleased, but Ching supported her assertion—a trifle reluctantly, Val imagined. The Basque shrugged eloquently.

"Very well, Señor. Perhaps a burro can be had for the Señorita. Luckily, I have just succeeded in stealing some *litros* of petrol from a German car which was parked with bad judgment near mine. There will be enough to take us to Cèret, which is less than fifty *kilómetros* from here."

"Splendid! We shall be ready at four, then."

"Behind this building is a small and narrow street," instructed Riego. "I shall bring the car and wait for you there. By using the hall which begins under the stairway you will arrive on this street. You will, of course, bring no more with you than is easily carried over a rough path."

"You may be saving us from a concentration camp, Jaime," Ching said warmly as the Basque finished his wine and prepared to get up.

"There will be a profit," replied Riego. "Perhaps that of having been useful to you, and perhaps more. *Quien sabe?*"

Ching got up, as did Luis, the latter evidently having the intention of going with the Basque. Riego turned and bowed with a show of elegance to Val.

"*Buenas tardes,* Señorita," he said. "We shall meet again."

But there should have been more sparkle in his shoe-button eyes, she thought. She smiled up at him dutifully, conscious of not feeling the same faith in him as she had, well, in Luis. She immediately dismissed the thought as a reaction from having met too many others that weren't at all trustworthy.

Val turned to Ching. "You put a lot of trust in that fellow —don't you, Ching?"

"Why not? I've known him for a long time—and he believes I once saved him from the Falange."

"Just the same, darling, the only Spaniard I trust is Luis."

"That's because you haven't met the proper kind—only those lugs who ran away to Paris during the revolution. There are

a lot of very splendid men in Spain."

Of course, this could be quite true, Val reflected. The Spaniards she'd met in Paris were ones who went in for the soft spots of life—and she made a wry face as she caught a mental glimpse of a certain little dancer who might justly have faced the same accusation. Then she saw Jurg Sampson standing in the doorway, looking at them. At the same moment, he started toward them. "Hello, folks," he greeted, reaching their table. "Anything to eat in this joint? I'm starving."

"We may have overlooked a few small bits," Ching said. "I trust you slept well?"

"Like a drunken horse."

"That's the way you sounded." Ching nodded emphatically. "With overtones from an out-size bassoon."

"So I snored."

"So you did—and also *how* you snored! How's the Nedry doing? Is she coming down?"

Sampson shook his head, smiling at Val as though he thought this might be pleasant news for her. "I rapped on her door just now, but no sound from within. I staked her to a double bromide before she turned in, so she'll probably stay put for a few hours yet. What's the news—is the border still closed?"

"Tight. Looks like we'll be here for days."

Sampson scowled. "Gosh—I hope not," he said. "The Germans are likely to move in any day now—"

"They wouldn't bother you," Val cut in. "And Nedry gets along with 'em well enough."

"She gets along with anyone, when she wants to." Sampson eyed Val speculatively. "She can be smooth, you know."

"Like silk." Val stuck her tongue into her cheek to make it bulge.

Sampson chuckled lightly. "Wonder what the prospect is for getting out by way of Toulouse, Dillon?" he asked. "You know, through Andorra."

"Doubtful. When the Spaniards close the gates, they close 'em all," discouraged Ching, carelessly. "Of course, you can always make it afoot, but that's the hard way."

"It is not," denied Val suddenly. "The hard way is on little boats that stink of dead fish!"

"Don't! Remember my appetite," objected Sampson, preparing to sit in one of the unoccupied chairs. "I'll never forget the last couple of days—or the nights, either!"

"You and me!" Val chimed in. "And probably Nedry."

"I'm going to have a look around after I've had a bite of something," said Sampson, ignoring her and looking for the waiter. "That is, if I can get anything. What do you say we meet here about eight for dinner? Do you suppose the old dame could dig up something for us?"

"I'll inquire." Ching stood up. "Meanwhile, if you have the strength, Jurg, see what you can find out about the route through Toulouse—or any way at all to get out of this blighted country. See you about eight?"

Sampson nodded absently, his eyes on Monsieur Landais, who was approaching the table in response to Jurg's upraised finger.

They left him sitting there and went into the entrance of Madame Landais's inn. Ching went on upstairs with the intention of trying for a couple of hours' sleep, while Val wandered to a narrow window at the side of the front door, watching with solemn interest a detachment of dispirited French infantrymen marching through the rain-swept street. When they had passed she stared a little longer at nothing at all.

It was horrible what the war had done to France! She recalled a parade in Paris one Fourteenth of July, before the war, and visualized the light, dancing step of the Chasseurs—darlings of the crowds who watched—the firm, confident tramp of other troops, the rumble of caissons, and heard again the blare of martial music. Now there had been nothing but the bitter ignominy of defeat in the shuffling tread of these soldiers who'd just passed.

She turned back to the stairs. It might be well if she began assembling an outfit to wear on this early morning dash to the south, and then securely packed everything else for Bob Gregory to take into Spain.

Chapter Twenty-Three: A DEAL IN ROAST DUCK

THE DINNER PROVIDED by Madame Landais had exceeded their expectations, and the men seemed disposed to linger there

with wine and cigarettes. Nedry had not joined them. Sampson said he'd been unable to get a response when he rapped on her door and had come down without her.

"She sure is a sleeping woman," he had said. "The double bromide, I suppose."

Val excused herself at the end of the meal and went up to her room. Her pretext was slight, but her purpose was serious enough. She let herself quietly into the small chamber, walking with great care to her bureau, where she lighted a lamp. The trunk and bag were packed for Bob Gregory to pick up when he was able to go to Barcelona, as he had cheerfully agreed to do. Now it was the diary that was on her mind.

This, she believed, was the ideal moment to retrieve it from Nedry, while she was sleeping so soundly in the adjoining room. The trick would be to get in there without arousing her, and so far Val had no definite idea of how she was going to accomplish this feat.

She had noticed that there was a connecting door between the rooms. The drawback to using it—if it happened not to be locked—was a huge chest of drawers placed squarely in front of it. One look convinced Val of the utter futility of trying to move it without the aid of a couple of husky men, and even then it couldn't be done in the necessary silence.

She stared at it for a while, then went over and pulled out one of the drawers, lowering it gently to the rug, and bent down to look into the space it had occupied. A thrill of hope gripped her as she saw that the chest had no back.

After removing another drawer, which made the doorknob visible, she thrust her head and shoulders in and tried the knob with nerve-destroying care. Turning it slowly until it would turn no more, she pushed gently, holding her breath in sheer suspense until the door yielded. It had not been locked.

Little by little she kept pushing, hoping that the long-disused hinges wouldn't let out a creaking wail. By the time she had got the door halfway open she was shaking like an old woman with palsy and her hands were damp with perspiration. She wiggled through the drawer space, discovering en route that it was a pretty close fit for her more rounded sections, but getting into Nedry's room without making any undue noise.

She stood up and looked around. There was a small lamp burning on a bedside table, the shade preventing much illumination in the room. Nedry was asleep—on her side with her face buried in one arm. Val saw what she wanted on the bureau almost alongside the doorway.

A moment later she was slithering back through the chest of drawers, holding Nedry's hat ahead of her—the millinery triumph the newswoman had put together at the Hotel Dijon. Excitement surging through Val drove the previous nervousness away. The hat was a good deal heavier than a hat had any business to be.

Placing it carefully on the floor, Val squiggled through the chest into her room, then, changing ends, reached back to close the door with just as much caution as she had opened it.

She sat down near the lamp on the bureau to do a bit of dissection. Under the lining, and so cleverly placed that it gave no hint of its presence, was the prayerbook-diary. Val stared at it for a few concentrated moments of thinking, then deposited it under a pillow on her bed, and went to her trunk.

Grinning now like an urchin who'd hit the jackpot in a defective gum machine, she pulled open a small drawer in the trunk and extricated the copy of *Don Quixote,* which for some reason she hadn't thrown away, and a little box of sewing things. She made a quick but neat job of stitching the Cervantes masterpiece into the hat.

Finished with this, she looked at the chest of drawers and sighed. Now she had to crawl through that damned thing again and return the hat! Well, better get at it—Nedry wasn't going to sleep indefinitely.

Back in the other room, she replaced the hat where she'd found it and turned toward the door she'd used to enter. She had closed it again for fear a draft might cause it to slam shut. As she reached for the knob she heard a change in Nedry's breathing and a sharp stab of alarm assailed her. If the newswoman was going to wake, there wasn't a chance of escaping undiscovered the way she'd come.

Swiftly, but making little noise, she went to the hall door and had her fingers on the knob when the bed creaked loudly and Nedry sat up. Val turned her back to the door, facing the

startled woman now staring at her.

"Oh, Nedry—I'm so sorry!" Val exclaimed, realizing that her voice was playing games in her throat. "I—I came up to see if you didn't want something to eat. I thought you'd be awake by this time."

"Yeah?" Nedry obviously would take a bit of selling on this idea. She reached out and turned up the wick of the lamp to increase the visibility.

"Yes. After I came in, I saw you were still sound asleep, and I didn't have the heart to waken you." Val's vocal cords were getting under better control. She began turning the doorknob in back of her.

"Sweet of you, pet." Nedry glared suspiciously at the girl for a moment, then flicked a glance at the bureau and the hat. "Was that all you came for?"

Val displayed what she hoped was proper surprise.

"What else?" she asked. "Jurg is downstairs, having dinner with us—Ching and Bob Gregory—" Her voice trailed off as she discovered that the door behind her was locked—and that the key was missing.

Nedry, relieved to see her precious bonnet just as she believed she had left it, pulled pillows behind her to make sitting up more comfortable. Then she got a cigarette from the table and lighted it. Val, after another desperate try at opening the door behind her, now found herself faced with the inevitable necessity of explaining how she had entered.

"I'm still too tired to get up—even for something decent to eat," drawled Nedry. She didn't believe Val's presence altogether on the up and up, but, convinced she had awakened in time to prevent any exploration of her room, was now inclined to make a pretense of accepting the explanation offered. "Of course, if you really are the dear little thing you're giving a good imitation of, you could bring me something."

"Sure, I will," stalled Val. "What would you like?"

"Is there a choice? Times are looking up."

"They've got a duck—a roast duck!" exclaimed Val, trying to keep despair from her voice. There just wasn't any way out of this impasse that she could think up. And she wasn't sure there was any more than a well-shredded fowl on the table

downstairs by this time.

"You're kidding!"

"No, I'm not. I've eaten better, but not lately."

"Well, I'll have some," said Nedry flatly. "Hop along and get it, before those wolves finish it off."

"All right." Val hesitated, searching for something else to account for not going. "What else do you want? There are some vegetables— Want some wine, too?"

"Bring the works—all you can carry in one trip," returned Nedry impatiently.

Val thought she heard someone climbing the stairs, but couldn't see what good that would do. Even if someone came to Nedry's door, she wouldn't be any better off—probably worse. "I'm glad you've managed to get some rest," she said. "It's more than I did."

"I'll feel better still after I've had some of that advertised duck," returned Nedry. She added pointedly, "Particularly if it's not stone cold."

The footsteps now sounded in the hall, coming toward the room. It was going to be a pretty situation if someone rapped on Nedry's door, with no means of opening it if Nedry asked to see who was there. Beans were about to be spilled all over the place, Val reflected, then jerked her mind to what Nedry was saying.

"I'd like some wine, too."

"Any particular sort—sherry, port—?" Val raised her voice a little to cover the sound of approaching feet, then realized it would be useless to try and talk loud enough to drown the noise of someone demanding admittance. The sounds abruptly ceased and she knew that whoever it was had stopped on the other side of the door. She spoke again, her tones unconsciously swelling. "It may take a little time to warm the dinner for you."

Reprieve! The person outside was fitting a key into the lock. Jurg Sampson, probably. The key had been inserted before Val finished her speech, but she had to think of something else to say lest Nedry hear it turning the lock. The newswoman solved this one. "Well, for the love of starving orphans, Val!" she exploded suddenly. "Don't stand there chattering—go on and get it, if you intend to!"

The opening door almost sent Val sprawling, but she caught herself and turned to greet the startled Jurg Sampson.

"Oh—hello!" she chirped. "Wonder you wouldn't knock a guy over, pushing in like that! I was just coming out."

"You were?"

Val sensed he was going on to ask how she'd got in and hurried to head him off. "Yes. I didn't think it was sporting of us to eat up everything with poor Nedry here sound asleep and missing it all. So I came and woke her up." The expression was still lingering in Jurg's eyes, and she added quickly, "Luckily her door wasn't locked."

"It wasn't? Why, I thought—" He caught himself, deciding it was just as well not to have it publicly known he possessed a key to Nedry's room, particularly as it didn't have the significance outsiders might suppose. He had merely taken it so that Nedry wouldn't have to get up to lock the door when he left her earlier.

"I'm bringing her a tray," said Val. "Imagine me lugging trays of food around for anyone! I'm getting soft!"

"Decent of you," Sampson called after Val as she went out, closing the door after her.

Val proceeded noisily to the head of the stairs, then, swiftly removing her slippers, rushed back to her own room. If they got curious about the connecting door and opened it— With the drawers on the floor! She snaked her own door key from the lock as she entered and rushed to the chest. In all probability it would fit the connecting door also, a disconcerting custom in these small hostelries.

The voices of the two in the next room were clearly audible as she wormed herself into the drawer opening and gently inserted the key. That was all to the good, as they weren't so likely to hear the turning key—if it worked.

"What was she doing here?" Val heard Sampson demanding, suspiciously. "Seems to me this idea of bringing you something to eat came a little late. We finished dinner a half hour ago—at least."

"Oh, Jurg—don't tell me it's all gone!" wailed Nedry. Her interest in food had been stimulated into a paramount demand.

Val breathed a little easier as the key turned and she heard

the faint rasp of the sliding bolt.

"Oh, there's stuff left," answered Jurg. "But what I want to know is how Val got in here. I locked the door when I left."

"You just thought you did," scoffed Nedry. "There's no other way she could have come in."

"How about this door?" Val heard the man's feet crossing the room and then the door shook as he tried it. "It's locked," he said. "Well, I guess I must have left your door unlocked, but I'd have sworn I didn't. Doesn't seem to be any way besides that she could get in."

"There isn't—and she had only just entered when I woke up. It was the closing of the door, I think, that roused me."

"Well, in that case she wouldn't have had time to do much looking around." Val heard him moving about again. "The chapeau feels just as heavy as it did."

"I'll certainly be glad when I can wear one which doesn't squash my brains flat," grumbled Nedry's voice. "I don't believe Val has the faintest idea that we snitched von Stamm's diary. She wouldn't have acted as she has, if she thought that."

"I suppose not. I'm just nervous about it, and I will be until we reach Lisbon with it. The Nazis will have to come across handsomely for it to make up for the trouble we've gone to."

"Don't forget that what they'd give us for it here is a nice ride to a concentration camp, brother," cautioned Nedry's voice. "Any luck about getting away?"

"Swell luck! We're leaving at six in the morning, by plane to Barcelona."

"A plane? How'd you manage that?"

Jurg's answering voice rolled his satisfaction. "Had a rare piece of luck in running into Captain Nacier, of the French air force. He's sneaking out of France with this plane to avoid the Nazis coming here. They don't like him. We're going with him."

"Great!"

"Keep it with the diary—under your hat. There's no room for anyone else."

"Who wants anyone else?" There was a short silence, then Nedry exclaimed peevishly, "Where's that brat with my dinner?"

"Probably having it warmed up for you."

Val slid out of the drawer space and stood up. There wasn't much danger of anyone coming into her room and finding the diary under the pillow, she thought, but still— The old army game, she decided, was best—never try to hide anything inside a room that may be searched. She put on her shoes, tucked the diary under her arm, and started for the stairs, looking for a suitable hiding-place for the book on the way.

A large framed painting hanging out at an angle from the wall supplied what seemed a good place to conceal the book until the chore of feeding Nedry had been done. Standing on tiptoes, after a quick survey of the corridor, she thrust the book behind the painting. It couldn't be seen accidentally by anyone traversing the hall and she didn't think it likely anyone would go poking around in the space behind the picture. Then she ran downstairs to the bar.

Ching and Bob Gregory were still idling over a bottle of wine, which didn't seem to be having any particular effect on either. "Thought you were going for a bit of shut-eye, Val," greeted Ching as she joined them.

"That's what I said, didn't I? Well, I found something better to do." She leaned over his shoulder, smiling meanwhile at Bob across the table, and whispered, *"I've got it!"*

Ching turned his face up to her, startled. "You mean—"

Val chuckled gleefully. "Yes—I mean!"

"That's swell!"

Bob Gregory broke in. "It's not polite to exchange secrets in the presence of a third person," he complained.

"We aren't being polite," replied Ching.

"On account of we're in love," amplified Val, grinning.

"Oh, I see." Bob waved a negligent hand. "My error. Love accounts for everything."

"Nedry wants what's left of the duck—if there is any." Val glanced at the table, but the remains of their dinner had been taken away. "She's starved, she says. I promised to bring her a tray."

"You little hypocrite! Maybe the Madame will give you something. She's just gone to the kitchen."

"I'll find out."

A few minutes later Val returned to Nedry's room, not with a tray, but with Monsieur Landais trailing behind her with one, rather well laden. She rapped smartly on the door and Jurg Sampson opened it.

"Here you are, Nedry," chirped Val, entering. "There wasn't so very much left of the duck, but I raided the kitchen and found some other fodder that will fill you up, at least."

Monsieur Landais followed her into the room, beaming with his idea of professional hospitality, and brought the tray to the small table at the side of the bed. Nedry eyed the spread with considerable favor. "Looks good to me," she said. "Anyhow, I could eat a fricasseed owl—and like it!"

Val left her digging into the food, with Jurg Sampson camped at the end of the bed and looking as though he only waited an invitation to join her, despite the large dinner he had already eaten. But Nedry apparently wasn't conscious of his presence.

Going back down the corridor, Val chuckled at the thought of Nedry toting a pound or so of *Don Quixote* on her dark head when she left for the plane in the morning. It would be fun if she could see them sneaking out. On second thought, she decided she would be happy if she never saw them again. A pair of rats, with the morals of a blackmailer!

She got the diary from its cache and returned to her room. There was still time for some earnest sleeping, but she would have to leave her door open for Ching to awaken her, as he'd said he would. She looked at the pseudo-prayerbook and wondered if it would be safe to keep it with her until then.

Chapter Twenty-Four: GOOD-BY TO FRANCE

VAL NEVER REMEMBERED much of the journey by night except the beginning. Stretched out, fully dressed, on her bed in Madame Landais's resort, she had been awakened by the contact of Ching's cool palm pressing on her forehead. The darkness in the room was modified only by the dim rays of a distant street lamp.

"Val," he whispered, as she stirred. "Wake up!"

She sat up, stiffened muscles registering sharp protest, then shook her head vigorously to drive away the drowsy, inert feel-

ing.

"Is it—time?" she murmured. She thrust a groping hand under her pillow for the diary and, not finding it immediately, this finished the job of bringing her to full consciousness. It had lodged in the space between the end of the mattress and the head of the bed.

"Less than half an hour," whispered Ching. "Shall I light the lamp?"

"Better not, I guess. I'm dressed and someone outside might see it." She rolled off the bed to her feet and smoothed the skirt of her outfit. "I'll be ready in a minute. I'm taking the small bag—it's not heavy."

"Okay."

She stood up straight, flexing her leg muscles by rising to her toes several times, varying this by sitting on her heels and rising again. Nedry, in the next room, wouldn't be sleeping very soundly, if at all, following her day in bed, and Val didn't intend to advertise her own nocturnal activity by moving around awkwardly on numbed legs. Sitting on the bed again, she slipped her feet into Oxfords, tying the laces by sense of touch, then rose to don her jacket and find her hat, which she pushed on without much care how it would look.

"Ready," she whispered, returning for the diary and picking up the small bag on the floor at the side of the bed.

"Right—let's go." Ching took the bag from her and, catlike, crossed the room to the door, Val following as silently. She hoped there would be no one wandering about in the hall when they went out, and grinned a little at the interpretation which probably would be put on their exit. Ching opened the door and peered out.

"All clear?" whispered Val, giggling.

Reaching back, Ching caught her by the wrist and dragged her after him into the corridor.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

"Just thinking what anyone would think who saw us sneaking out," returned Val. "Jumping our room rent!"

"Or something worse. But we're all paid up—our landlady hasn't much faith in her guests, it seems." He let go of her wrist and took her hand instead. "Gee, but you are one in a

million, Val!"

She didn't respond to this until they were safely on the stairway. "One in a million what?"

"Women, of course."

She laughed softly. "Have there been that many before me?"

"You little mutt!"

"Anyway, I hope I'm the last one."

"You can count on that, pigeon." He paused in the dark hall under the stairs leading to the rear of the establishment, took time out to hold her tightly in his arms, as though it would add verity to his words. It did—somewhat.

"Darling—" Val was a little breathless. "You certainly have a hallway technique!"

The rain had stopped sometime during the night, but the dark street was still wet and obscured with light mist when they emerged. A narrow, winding way, enclosed by houses of past centuries, it gave more the feeling of a Hollywood set cleverly contrived for ten seconds on the screen. A slender figure detached itself from the shadows and moved toward them. Val recognized the easy, swinging gait of Luis as he came nearer.

"The car is waiting farther down the street, Señor," he said, coming to a halt.

"Good!" Ching handed him Val's bag and took her arm. She still wasn't good at walking on cobbled streets, and there was no sidewalk.

Beyond the next turn they found Riego slouched behind the wheel of his car. It was a good one, an American car of fairly recent manufacture, and, of all things, a limousine!

"We leave in state," observed Val as Ching helped her in. Luis got in beside Riego, already starting the motor. "Much better than the wet smack we arrived in. Mmm!" She sank into the cushions with a sigh, relaxing luxuriously into Ching's encircling arm.

"We're off!" exclaimed Ching, as the car began to move.

"Oh, Ching, darling," Val whispered nervously. "If we only get through!"

"We will," Ching answered. "This is the pay-off—and things are breaking our way."

Val stirred in his arm, seeking the maximum of comfort to

be found there, and her hand touched General von Stamm's diary in her lap. How odd that the old general, patiently setting down his private opinion of the outrages he had been forced to countenance, had also supplied the means of bringing her close into Ching's arms. She felt secure—he wouldn't go a-wandering again, because she wasn't any longer just the self-centered dancing girl who had attracted but not really held him.

Now she understood him. What she had formerly felt had been an utterly feminine resentment because his ideals, his unwavering purpose of helping oppressed and suffering victims of insane brutality, had come before his regard for her. It dawned on her that even now he would sacrifice everything to that end, just as Luis had yielded his sister and his people. Ching knew that life itself isn't important if it is only to be endured in misery.

She wanted him to be like this, now. The love for him that possessed her was so much greater than the entirely selfish desire she'd felt before. If, when they were safe again, he decided his job was to go away to fight alongside the others, she wouldn't try to keep him back. She'd want him to go—even though it would break her heart to lose him. Other women had suffered the same way and been brave about it. She mustn't ask for more than they had been able to keep.

"What are Nedry and Sampson planning—or do you know?" asked Ching after a while.

"Oh, dear—I forgot to tell you!" exclaimed Val. "Some Frenchman is flying them out in the morning—to Barcelona. He's taking a military plane to escape the Nazis."

"Who is he—did you learn his name?"

"Captain"—Val thought hard for a minute, trying to recall the name Jurg Sampson had mentioned—"oh, yes—Nacier."

"Jules Nacier!" Ching uttered a short laugh. "Yes, the Nazis would like to have him. He's been active for de Gaulle. I wonder why he's taking Nedry and Sampson."

"Maybe he needs some money," hazarded the practical Val. "They could pay him, couldn't they?"

"You're a shrewd little hussy," answered Ching. "I think you've come up with the right answer. Well, we needn't worry

too much about them."

Snug and comfortable in Ching's arm, Val wasn't worrying about anyone now. She told him what she had overheard of the couple's ultimate plan to dispose of the diary, which was about what Ching had suspected. The car was beyond the outskirts of the city and traveling at a fast clip through the night-obliterated countryside. A bit too fast for safety, but after what she had been through it didn't occur to her to be concerned about reckless driving.

She was getting sleepy, and if she'd tried to imagine one, there couldn't have been a more soothing place than she occupied now. She didn't try. Ching seemed lost in his own thoughts, and Val, dimly conscious of the delectable sensation of sleep creeping through her veins, let her head come to rest against his broad chest, and—

Anyhow, it was all she remembered until she felt herself being shaken by someone and opened her eyes to discover that a new day was well along in the making. Through the window of the car she could see in the distance a snowcapped peak—the great and lonely-looking Canigou.

Then Riego was driving the car into the courtyard of a roadside hostel nestled between a low hill and a small stream. Beyond were more hills, increasing in height with the distance to become the eastern end of the Pyrenees. With the exception of the Canigou, none was high enough to rate really as a mountain.

A Spanish-looking peasant came from one of the doors opening into the courtyard, wearing the look of one torn from bed by unexpected and entirely unwelcome intrusion. He shuffled toward them as Luis climbed down from the front to open the rear door of the car.

"*Buenos dias,* Señores," he greeted, without conviction.

"How are you, Señor Núñez?" returned Riego from the driver's seat. He leaned out and regarded the newcomer speculatively. "Is breakfast ready?"

There would be breakfast, the innkeeper replied, in plenty. It was the good fortune of the establishment to have at the moment innumerable eggs and freshly roasted baby lamb. He would leave at once to set his good but unfortunately lazy wife

at the task.

The meal was served on a table built around the trunk of a large tree in the courtyard. The rising sun was rapidly driving the chill from the air and it was pleasant just to sit amid the silence and watch the dissipating mist in the small valleys below. But they were not to sit very long.

Riego, making short work of his breakfast, had then gone away with the car, to leave it, he said, with a friend where it would be safe until his return. He came back presently, astride a burro.

"For the Señorita," he said, dismounting by the simple expedient of lowering his feet to the ground and stepping back from the animal. "His name is Anteojos."

"How do you do, Anteojos," chirped Val. "What does that mean?"

"Spectacles," interpreted Ching, whose Spanish was much better than the girl's. "Because of those white rings around his eyes, I guess."

The beast did have the appearance of wearing make-up eyeglasses on his face. There was no saddle, merely a piece of sacking tied onto his back, and when Val got astride the burro she felt about as comfortable as if stuck halfway over a rail fence.

"Gee, do I *have* to ride this thing?" she complained. "Honest, Ching, I'd rather walk."

"That's what you think now," he answered, grinning. "But it's a long, tough trail over these hills and you'll be glad enough to have something to sit on before you've finished."

"Yeah?" Val wasn't convinced. "And after that it'll be days before I'm glad to sit on anything, I'll bet. Don't they ever feed these animals? I mean, it's not natural for this fellow to have such an appalling ridge down his back, is it?"

The burro swung his oversized head around, looked up at Val sorrowfully, and waggled his long ears.

"Y'see, he heard you—and he's hurt!" Ching shook with the effort not to laugh. He didn't want to discourage Val, but she looked so damned funny!

"*He's* hurt! Wait till he gets through with me. Instead of walking shoes, I should have worn a bustle!"

The procession started, with Riego in the van, Luis just behind him, and Ching leading the burro with Val swaying about on his back. At first they followed a definite trail through the dried grass, but as they continued the trail disappeared. Occasionally they would encounter a suggestion of a path, but Riego ignored all these.

For the most part the party kept to the valleys, winding from one into another, across a terrain covered with loose stones and short grass which was slippery under foot to all save Val's plodding, surefooted mount.

Surefooted he was, but Val was seldom confident that she wouldn't slide off at one end or the other as he scrambled over obstacles en route. He seldom chose to go around anything. His ears offered tempting handholds, but not sure how a burro would react, Val resisted the impulse.

The sun reached the meridian and the party halted to sit under a scrubby tree to eat the lunch Luis had been carrying. That is, the men sat down. Val rather preferred standing. Only because she found herself stiff and unsteady afoot did she consent to remount the burro when the party was ready to go on.

"And I complained about boats!" she gritted as Ching helped her back aboard Anteojos. "How much farther is this Spain you have been talking about?"

"Oh, we should reach the frontier before dark," replied Ching vaguely.

"When's dark?" demanded Val, noting by her watch with fresh dismay that it was only a few minutes after one o'clock. Then she decided firmly to stop grousing. It had been altogather her own idea to come along with Ching and Luis, and she really shouldn't be making it difficult for them. "Okay, captain—lead on. At least I can stop worrying about my hip measurement!"

The afternoon crept by and hills that had seemed far ahead receded into the background. Riego produced a bottle of strong mountain wine which he carried slung from a shoulder, but to Val it wasn't at all palatable. It was warm and tasted of the goatskin bags the Spaniards store it in, but it did supply a lift when she got it down.

She wondered at the fortitude of Ching, who strode along

ahead of her, showing not the least indication of weariness. Riego, of course, and probably Luis, were more or less used to this sort of thing. So, she decided grimly, was Anteojos.

The hills were casting longer shadows when Riego halted abruptly at the upper end of a gully that seemed to offer no possible further progress. As Luis led the patient burro up to where Ching and the Spaniard waited, she saw that what she had supposed to be merely outcroppings of stone were the remains of a stone house.

There was more of it visible as she approached, screened at first by a thicket of bushes and trees, but only walls and tumbled masonry, without suggestion of a roof, and it had been built against the side of a very steep hill.

Ching helped her to dismount and held to her arm until she began to get some feeling into her benumbed legs. Then she staggered to a soft-looking tuft of grass and promptly sat down. Ching followed and stood before her, no amusement in his eyes. "Feeling pretty low, aren't you, Val?" It was more of a statement than a question.

Val ignored it, looking around at the desolate hillside and the gully, filled with broken stones. "Where are we?" she asked. "Or does Señor Riego know? Looks like a dead end street to me."

"On the other side of this ridge is Spain, he says," replied Ching. "Santa Marta. Can you carry on—or had you better rest awhile?"

"I'm not so tired as lame from riding." Val stared up at the formidable hillside back of the ruins of the house. "But don't tell me baby's got to climb over that mountain!"

Ching shook his head. "No. There's an easier—and more private—way."

Val held her hands up to him. "Let's go, then," she said. "If I sit here ten minutes more, I won't be able to do anything but waddle. I think I'll be all right, after I've walked a little and loosened up."

Ching drew her to her feet. There was something in the way he looked down at her that eased her consciousness of discomfort. She lifted her chin perceptibly and smiled with freshly stimulated courage.

"Val—" he began, then halted awkwardly, although his eyes kept on with the message.

"Yes?" She wanted to hear as well as see it.

"You're precious!" he finished.

Her hands still rested in his, but then she had no intention of withdrawing them. She waited for him to continue, liking it, and not caring at all that Riego and Luis were watching them with the amusement the world always finds in lovers. Ching, however, added nothing more, but released one of her hands and turned toward the waiting guide and Luis.

"We'll go on," he said. "Right away."

"*Si,* Señor," responded Riego, getting up from the flat rock he had been sitting on. "We go."

He leaned over, his legs widespread, and took hold of the flat rock by its edge. Then, with surprising power for a man so slenderly built, he tilted it up, revealing a jagged opening about a yard across. Luis sprang to help him steady the stone.

"So that's it?" Ching exclaimed, coming with Val to the edge of the opening and peering down into it.

"*Si.* At the other end of this hole is the Iglesia el Espiritu Santo."

"A church?" Ching looked puzzled.

Riego nodded. "In Santa Marta," he said.

"How about my friend here?" asked Val, with a wave at the burro. "He'll never be able to climb down into that hole."

"Anteojos will find his way home, and from long experience, will avoid any Nazi patrols he finds," replied Riego, with a saturnine grin. "Just as we have."

"I wasn't aware there were any around here." Ching seemed somewhat surprised.

"On two occasions since we left the inn we have been observed, but to one who knows these hills it is an easy business to lose them."

The Basque, on his knees, reached into the hole and brought out a pair of oil lanterns, placing them on the ground to assure himself that they were filled with oil, as he had left them, in working order.

"Luis, *amigo,* hand these to me when I am down," he said, reversing himself and lowering his slender body into the open-

ing. Groping with his feet for footholds which he knew were there, he supported himself with his forearms on the surface of the ground. "Let the Señorita come next and I will guide her feet."

Val took a long, last look at the blue sky, the dreary vista of seemingly endless hills, and backed fearfully into the hole, feeling Riego's hands guiding her feet to the footholds in the sides of the opening.

It was good-by to France!

Chapter Twenty-Five: AN END AND A BEGINNING

FOR WHAT PURPOSE and by whom this passage had been dug under the ridge was something no one in the party stumbling through it would ever know. Ching hazarded the opinion that it had been excavated by early smugglers and he wasn't contradicted.

So far as Val was concerned, she was far too busy trying to keep herself upright to have any curiosity about that. The floor was strewn with rocks, the smaller ones rolling underfoot, while the walls had been jaggedly hewed in the stone. Every few yards they encountered piles of rubble which had fallen from the roof and which had to be carefully climbed over.

As they penetrated deeper and deeper, with many windings, the air became almost intolerably oppressive and stale, and the walls were repulsively slimy to the touch. Only the feeble yellow rays from the lanterns made the blackness less Stygian and enabled them to avoid treacherous footing.

"Every time I kick about anything, it gets worse," growled Val as they paused to rest. "First it was the stinky fishing boat, then Anteojos, and now this!"

"That should teach you to stop complaining," Ching advised cheerily. He reached out to squeeze her hand. "Buck up, pigeon —it won't be long now. Riego says the tunnel isn't more than three hundred yards long."

"I haven't the faintest idea of how long that is, but I'll sure shout hallelujah when we pass the last yard."

They trudged on in silence. The difficulties of the traverse didn't make for conversation more intelligible than occasional

grunts as a loose stone turned under someone's foot. Unexpectedly to all save the Basque, they abruptly found themselves at the end of the passage. His lantern revealed a recess in the wall at one side, extending perhaps ten feet into it and a few feet wide. In this was a flight of crude steps leading upward.

"This way, *amigos,*" Riego said as he started ascending. "This is the end."

"End of what?" murmured Val, watching him, excited at the prospect of arriving at a conclusion to all the trouble of the past week. "Looks like a worm's-eye view of a grave to me."

"So it is," the Basque answered imperturbably.

Following him up the stairs, they found him standing under what appeared to be a stone cover over the hole. Riego had his shoulders hunched against it, thrusting upward, and after a considerable effort he succeeded in moving it aside sufficiently to climb out.

"The Señorita," they heard him call.

Val climbed up and put her hand in the yellow palm of the Basque, who then helped her up through the orifice. Ching and Luis came scrambling out, one after the other, and then, with more light, Val realized where she was.

They stood in a small, stone-walled room, of dreadful import. The oblong objects scattered about made it only too apparent that they had emerged into a burial vault. The air was filled with a musty odor, mingled with a faint scent of withered flowers. Val shrank back against Ching.

"Worse and worse!" she exclaimed nervously. "Didn't I tell you?"

"Not so bad," he soothed, patting her shoulder reassuringly. "We haven't anything to fear from the tenants of this place, you know. It's only those still alive who can injure us."

"That's not the way I heard it," whispered Val, shakily. "Dead people don't like having people barging in like this. Let us barge out!"

The Basque had already crossed to the door of this gruesome place and was pushing it open. Even Luis seemed eager to follow him into a much larger space beyond, but Val, when she reached it, decided that the improvement, if any, was only in size.

"We are now in the crypt under La Iglesia el Espiritu Santo," explained Riego. "Señorita, we have just emerged from the grave of one Don Alonzo and into his family vault. It was evidently needful to dispossess the Don to make use of his grave as an entrance into the passage. I cannot say where he is finishing his rest, however."

"And I don't give a damn, either!" disclaimed Val. "All I want is to get back where people are still walking around and talking!"

She looked around apprehensively at the dolorous surroundings and shivered. An outdoor cemetery wasn't so depressing as this gloomy, cavern-like space, dimly lighted by the flickering rays of the two lanterns filtering through the dust-laden air. Elaborately carved tombs and sarcophagi were scattered about, with many more modestly capped graves under stone slabs on the floor.

There were several entrances into family vaults, such as the party had just come out of, but the crypt somehow impressed Val with the feeling that it had existed in neglected silence for a long time.

"We can go upstairs into the church, Señor Dillon," the Basque said. "But I do not think it wise to go farther than that until dark. Have you the time?"

"Quarter of six," replied Ching.

The Basque brooded over this for a moment, then started toward a flight of circular steps, the rest following. Val was mildly surprised to find the interior of the church above to be comparatively modern, considering the dates she'd noticed on the gravestones below.

"But this is the third church to be built over the crypt," Riego explained, absently. "It has been twice destroyed—and now it has been abandoned."

The atmosphere was scarcely less somber than that of the crypt, but relieved by remnants of pale afternoon light coming through high, stained-glass windows. Deserted by the living, its only congregation sealed in earth or stone below, the gaunt edifice seemed to wait in silence for the final disintegration of all things created by human hands.

There was a door located in a wing of the transept, hooded

with a porch. The Basque led them to it, stopping to peer out after he'd opened the door a few inches. He seemed unaccountably ill at ease, holding up his hand as if bidding them to be silent. Val stared at his hawklike face, thinking now that he really looked like some pictures she'd seen of American Indians as much as he did Spanish.

"There are Spanish soldiers in the grounds!" he exclaimed softly, withdrawing his head. "I do not understand what they are doing here."

Ching stepped to the door and looked out, uttering a soft exclamation at what he saw as he backed away again. He looked at the Basque sharply, with rising distrust.

"You don't?" he asked harshly. "Colonel von Stamm and his corporal are there, too, and coming toward this door. You will explain some other time how it happened that they knew our plans, but right now, Riego, if you have delivered us into their hands, I will kill you!"

"I would not do such a thing, Señor!" denied Riego. "It would be a poor return for what you did for me—at Vinaroz."

"Poor indeed," growled Ching. He turned back into the interior of the dark church. "Come on, we'll go back into the crypt—and then if they follow, it's back into the passage. I don't intend being taken into the hands of the Falange. You will come too, Riego."

"Of certainty," the Basque replied, and as though realizing he would be ordered to, led the way back down the circular stairway into the regions under the church.

Val, however, decided that possession of the diary wasn't going to be a good idea, if they were taken. As they hurried through the passage, she dropped it into a font which stood in a shadowed recess at one side. There wasn't any water in it, she made sure, as she slipped the book into the bowl.

Ching closed the door at the head of the stairs and then came down to the waiting group. The Basque stood apart from Val and Luis, and his expression was harried. Ching lighted one of the lanterns, which had been extinguished when they went upstairs.

"We'll wait here a couple of minutes," he said, coming back from the task. "At least until we're sure they are coming down.

I wonder if there's any other way out of this subway graveyard."

"Riego should know," suggested Val, looking around. "Where is he? A moment ago he was right there."

Ching's head jerked around, with a muttered curse at his carelessness in letting Riego be unattended for even a moment. But the Basque was nowhere in sight, and then came the sound of lightly running feet. Whirling toward the stairs, Ching was just in time to see the man reach the door at the top and disappear.

"We've been damn' well double-crossed, Val," Ching raged. "By that—"

"We can still use the passage under the hill," Val interrupted breathlessly, but recoiling at the idea.

Ching shook his head, still staring up at the door.

"No—not now. We'd only find one of those Nazi patrols Riego spoke of waiting for us." He sighed. "The only possible out is to make a deal for the diary, I guess. I don't even have a gun, and if I did, I wouldn't risk your being hurt."

"I left the book—" she began, then broke off, gazing with Ching at the upstairs door.

It was opening, and she saw the Basque's tall figure outlined in the faint light behind him. But he was not alone. At his side stood a short, heavy man in Spanish uniform. Val heard a slight hissing sound and glanced at Luis. His face was livid, eyes burning with a hatred such as Val had never before seen in any human being.

She looked back toward the stairs and now the Spanish officer was descending heavily, the arrogant, stiff-necked von Stamm at his heels. Both were looking straight at Ching and Val, who were stopped against the wall of one of the larger tombs. Both the descending men carried Luger pistols and flashlights. The Basque, however, had not come down with them.

"You will please make me no more trouble, Dillon!" called von Stamm. "It is useless."

"So you've called out the Spanish army, too," returned Ching, with bitter sarcasm. "You must have felt quite secure!"

"This is Colonel Deja, commandant of the district," said von Stamm, pausing at the bottom step and indicating the man in uniform. "He informs me that he has a certain interest in one

Charles John Dillon."

So this was what had transformed Luis into a seething, venomous animal! Val glanced instinctively at where he had been, but he was no longer in sight. It wasn't that she expected much, but her spirits sank a little lower at this new desertion. Now she and Ching were alone, unarmed with anything save their wits to combat these two unscrupulous men—and there were more at their call.

"Colonel Deja's interest is flattering but unexciting," she heard Ching saying coldly. "But he has my permission to speak directly, since Spanish is a language I know well enough."

Val shifted her gaze to the Spaniard and now that he and von Stamm had come closer the feeble rays of the lantern revealed to her a face that would have chilled her with revulsion no matter where she saw it. Marks of some repulsive disease disfigured his skin, his nose was a mere caricature, and his eyes shone like those of a starved hyena at the scent of carrion. No hair was visible under the edge of his cap.

"Later," replied Deja, in English. "When my good friend Colonel von Stamm has accomplished his mission with you."

Ching's eyes flicked to Val's pale face as he suddenly recalled that she had begun to say she'd left the diary somewhere. Then he faced von Stamm again, meeting the German's insolent gaze with one equally contemptuous.

"This time, Colonel, you will have failed completely in your effort to recover the diary, if you prevent us from leaving this place," Ching declared with an assurance quite baffling to Val. "In that event, the next appearance of the *tagebuch* will be in the possession of the Gestapo."

The German laughed, gratingly, like marbles cascading down a washboard, and shifted his position, spreading his feet apart and putting one hand on his hip. The pose might have been striking had he been in uniform, but failed without it.

Val, attracted by some slight movement in the shadows behind him, caught sight of the opening door of the vault they had only a short while before come through. When it had opened several inches the dim face of Luis appeared. Across the intervening space their gaze met, then Luis nodded and withdrew, closing the door again.

She thrilled with sudden hope as she realized the Spanish boy's intention to reassure her that he was up to something to retrieve this new situation. She began racking her brain for a possible solution.

"I suppose you will now deny you have my father's property with you," sneered von Stamm, balancing the heavy Luger in his hand. "But I shall make certain."

"Yes, of course you will," agreed Ching. "But you won't find it. However, go ahead and search me before I dispose of it magically."

"Colonel Deja is a very excellent marksman," warned von Stamm, putting the Luger away. "So while I am examining your clothing, you will take care not to attempt resistance."

Ching wasn't planning to hinder von Stamm's search, since he hadn't the diary anyway, but was disturbed with the thought of what might happen to Val when the German's attention turned to her, as it inevitably would. He knew that neither von Stamm nor Deja would have any hesitancy in searching her as well—and this would be intolerable.

Val caught sight of Luis again, or rather his head. The rest of him was concealed behind the door. He held up an index finger and pointed it first at Deja's back, then at von Stamm's, busy searching Ching. Next he held the finger upright and waved it to and fro, bringing his hand to a fixed position, the finger raised. His lips moved as though speaking a word of a single round syllable.

"One!" translated Val to herself. Her mind was racing. One, one, one—but he'd pointed at both. Oh! either one; either Deja or von Stamm! She was still staring fixedly at Luis. Apparently, even in the poor light of the lantern, he read the course of her thoughts, for now he crooked the finger as if in invitation, flicked his gaze from Val to von Stamm and then Deja, and once again withdrew behind the shielding door.

Val almost smiled. It was so clear what Luis had been trying to convey. He wanted her, in some way, to lure one of these men into the vault. How to do it was something she'd have to work out for herself.

"He does not have it!" von Stamm exclaimed in angry disappointment. He stepped away from Ching, glancing at Deja

and then at Val. "So it must be the girl."

"I haven't it, either," denied Val, surprised at the steadiness of her voice.

"You also will be searched." Von Stamm took a step toward her. Val retreated by as much.

"You shan't touch me!" she exclaimed hotly. "If anyone is to have the pleasure of searching me, it will be your Spanish friend. It would be more endurable."

The German's face flushed as he realized the depth of her insult. That any woman could welcome the touch of this Spaniard's hands in preference to his was the nadir of contempt.

"Very well. I am sure Colonel Deja will oblige."

"Con gusto!" The Spaniard's eyes gleamed in anticipation.

"We will go over here where we can be more private," said Val, her heart beginning to beat excitedly again. She walked toward the vault concealing the waiting Luis, and Deja, after an inquiring look at von Stamm, started after her.

"Val!" choked Ching, in helpless wrath. "The diary isn't worth it! Come back!"

"But we haven't it, Ching," she called back over her shoulder. "And I'm not afraid of Colonel Deja."

"I shall be most gentle!" exclaimed Deja in keen anticipation. "Never fear."

"Val!" implored Ching again. The German struck him across the mouth.

Val, only a few yards from the door now, covered the remaining distance in a long leap before the startled Deja realized what she was doing. He charged after her, reaching for her just as she succeeded in pulling the door open and disappeared inside.

Convinced that the girl was trying to escape, Deja hurtled into the vault after her—and pitched forward on his face as he tripped over Luis's waiting foot. He went down heavily, but without making much noise on the stone floor, the Luger skittering away from his sprawling hand.

Like a dark flash, the Spanish boy retrieved the gun, then returned to stand over Deja threateningly. Val pulled at the heavy door, to prevent any sound reaching the crypt and von Stamm. She hoped the German would assume that Deja had

trapped her in the vault and was carrying out his purpose. The door closed, cutting off the sound of von Stamm's voice like a broken telephone connection.

Luis now had the flashlight, which Deja had also dropped, still serviceable in spite of the impact on the stone floor. The Spaniard twisted his head around to see who had attacked him, but Val saw no sign of recognition in his eyes.

"Who are you?" he demanded, hoarse with rage.

"You do not know me, Cousin Alvarez?" taunted Luis. His tone was as vicious as a trapped leopard's hiss. "You murdered my little sister and my mother, but still you do not know me! I am Luis—"

"Luis!"

"*Si,* and now it is your turn to die—here in this tomb! Are you afraid of it?"

Deja struggled to his feet, but seemed too frightened now to fight against impending disaster. He stood watching Luis, his hands shaking and great beads of perspiration cascading from his red forehead. His thick lower lip hung open while he tried to moisten the upper one with the tip of his dry tongue.

Val's panic almost equaled his. There had been violent death all around her since the war began, but not where she had to see it. To stand and watch would be a horror she'd never forget, but a look at Luis's set face was enough to convince her that nothing could deter him from his purpose.

He had lived only for this moment. A fleeting wonder as to what his fulfilled revenge would leave to build a life on crossed her mind, but she did not dally with it, did not feel prompted to try to stay his hand. It wouldn't have been of the slightest use, and no matter what her feelings were, she realized that Deja had forfeited his right to live.

Luis was silent for a brooding interval, watching Deja as though hoping the man would attempt a desperate move against him. But Deja seemed to have lost all power of resistance. He returned Luis's hate-filled gaze as though hypnotized, the veins in his throat now purple with tension.

The Spanish boy stooped and laid the flashlight on the slab covering a low grave, never taking his eyes from his enemy, nor did Deja let his gaze wander from Luis. The flashlight now cast

weird shadows of both men on the crumbling wall behind and above them. Luis straightened up slowly and with careful deliberation thrust the pistol into his belt behind him. Seeing this, Deja's stare became less fixed and showed a tiny gleam of crafty hope.

But if he had expected any turn of Luis's purpose to leniency he was mistaken. As the boy disposed of the pistol his other hand brought out a knife.

Val felt herself becoming sick as she saw the blade shining in the hard beam of the flashlight. This was infinitely worse than the gun. She began stumbling toward the door, her whole physical being in revolt against witnessing this. Vaguely she heard Luis speaking, his words echoing from the grimy walls. "I do not murder, Deja. You have a knife. Let me see how well you use it against another who is not unarmed!"

The sound of feet scuffling on the stone floor came to her ears and she shot a terrified glance backward. Deja had backed away from Luis, but now he had a knife in his hand. Luis moved with the quickness of a cat's spring and she caught the flash of both blades, then heard a hoarse and profane exclamation. She saw blood on Deja's cheek, saw his horrible eyes as he lunged back at Luis—

With a choking gasp, she pushed her way out of the vault and leaned against its wall, trembling so violently she didn't dare the effort to go farther. Sounds from within indicated the fight was going on in subdued fury.

She looked toward the place where she had left Ching and von Stamm. They were still there, and the situation seemed unchanged. The German stood solidly just as he had before, his Luger pistol covering Ching. While she was still watching them, trying to regain control over both mind and body, the noise inside the vault ceased abruptly and a moment later Luis came out.

"It is—finished," he said softly. "I am sorry—" He broke off as his gaze followed Val's toward the two men across the room.

Luis and Val started forward with a common impulse. The noise of their feet on the stone floor caught von Stamm's ears and he turned his head, probably expecting to see the returning Colonel Deja. The opportunity was one which Ching had

been hoping for in painful tension. He lunged forward, his shoulder crushing against von Stamm's side, low and hard, and the German sprawled in the dust with Ching all over him. As Luis and Val reached the spot, the newsman regained his feet. He brought von Stamm's pistol with him.

"I suppose you have killed Deja," Ching said to the Spanish boy. "Well, he had it coming."

"He is dead," affirmed Luis, laconically. "But I did not kill him. We were fighting with knives, and in a matter of minutes I should have cut him to pieces. I think he inhaled the odor of death in his filthy nostrils and it broke something inside him. He seemed to choke to death."

Colonel von Stamm got back on his feet, the fury in his face fading into a belated belief of ultimate triumph.

"You cannot escape from here without being taken by Colonel Deja's men in the churchyard," he sneered. "And then it will be arranged for you to pay for the murder your man has just committed."

Ching shrugged with an indifference he didn't feel. He recalled having seen the German corporal, Fleber, with the Spanish soldiers outside, and realized the situation was not greatly improved.

"That will be taken care of when we have disposed of you," Ching returned, raking his wits for some way to accomplish this.

Luis spoke up. "This German pig could be shut up in one of the vaults, Señor," he suggested. "To be miraculously discovered later—after you have gone. I could see that this miracle happens."

"Fine!" exclaimed Ching. "Let's get at it and then see about getting away from this catacomb."

Colonel von Stamm registered a vehement protest at being left in a vault containing ancestors of the Gonzales family—a protest which Luis pointed out was unjustified, as everyone should know the family was a very good one. If it were possible for the colonel while resting among this illustrious gathering to establish some means of communication, he could profit by learning a few points of honor apparently unknown among the *herrenvolk*.

Leaving the crypt, Ching led the way upstairs and to the door in the wing of the transept. Val recovered the diary from the dusty bowl of the font, then joined Ching. He was peering out into the dark grounds, looking rather perplexed.

"There's no one in sight," he whispered.

"You say that as though it were bad news," returned Val.

"If there's anyone there, I'd rather they'd be where I can see 'em."

"Let me go out, Señor. It will not be me they look for." Luis crowded past Val to the door.

They watched the dim figure of the Spanish boy as he moved about the grounds. For a while he was entirely lost to their view, but presently reappeared from around a clump of bushes, walking confidently back to the transept door.

"The way is clear," he said. "Only the dead are between us and the road."

They hurried down a path after Luis, who seemed well acquainted with the terrain, and reached an unpaved road a short distance away. Below them, a couple of miles away, the lights of a village twinkled. Luis said it was Santa Marta and turned in that direction. But they did not arrive in the little village.

A quarter of a mile from the church they heard the noise of a powerful car coming toward them and huddled beside the road in the vain hope it would pass them unseen. As the headlights swept around the curve it caught them full in the twin beams, the brakes screamed, and the car came to a sliding stop opposite where the little group stood. Corporal Fleber jerked the door open and stepped out.

"I've got a gun, Fleber, and I'm ready to use it!" snapped Ching.

Fleber laughed. "So I see, but do put it away. The fact is, I was on my way to rescue you and Miss Bright from von Stamm and Deja. But you've attended to that yourselves. I might have known."

"Do you expect us to fall for that?"

"Not without more explanation. You see, Dillon, I am Captain Arthur Flebert—don't ignore the final 't' in Flebert, please —of the British Army, detached for intelligence work in Ger-

many ever since Hitler began his nonsense at Munich."

"Captain Arthur Flebert!" the amazed Ching almost shouted. "Am I an idiot in missing that one? I knew about you—but I never—"

"Friend of yours, Ching?" asked Val, bewildered.

"Friend of all of us," responded the newsman.

Flebert opened the door of the car. "If you'll get in," he said, "we'll get started for Barcelona. I got in touch with my embassy in Madrid this afternoon and they've sent this car up. There's a plane waiting to take me to Gibraltar and I'd like to have you and Miss Bright come along as my guests. The Falange, I understand, doesn't like you, and this will be safe."

Another figure slid out of the car as they prepared to get in—Riego. He looked sheepishly at Ching.

"Am I forgiven for having appeared unfaithful, Señor Dillon?" he asked. "My orders from Señor Flebert were to reveal nothing to you."

"I was sure you would wreck my plans if you got the faintest notion this trip to Spain had been arranged for you." The British officer laughed. "I couldn't risk it."

"We'd have tried our best to wreck 'em," agreed Ching. He helped Val into the car and glanced at Riego. "It's all right, Jaime."

"I suppose it's no good explaining anything more," Flebert said, "although I'll oblige, if you like."

"Well"—Ching paused, one foot on the running-board—"I would like to know your connection with this diary business."

"Very small, Dillon. Only that it provided me with a passage from France that might otherwise have been difficult to manage. You see, I had accumulated some information for my General Staff that it was imperative for me to deliver. I also knew of the *Kommandant's* diary, so I stole it, saw that it was properly in underground hands, then wangled things so I should be sent after it. I knew General von Stamm would trust no one except his little boy, Kurt, to get it back for him, and that I was the most likely person to be assigned to help him. The colonel isn't too bright, you know.

"Next, it was my constant effort to keep in touch with you, Dillon—as soon as I was sure you had it—and to keep the

colonel reasonably hot on the trail. Incidentally, I brought the Gestapo in, too, since I have been a member of that outfit and could do nothing without advising them of my movements."

"And we were dodging all of you!" wailed Val from inside the car.

"Let me say your dodging was more perfectly executed than I had planned on," Flebert said, grinning. "There were times when I believed that between you, you had messed up my whole plan. And you, Miss Bright, are a singularly guileful young woman. I think Mr. Dillon is going to have to watch you closely indeed."

Ching got into the back of the car and dropped down beside Val, while Flebert returned to his seat at the wheel to start the drive to Barcelona. Val caught sight of Luis, standing lonesomely on the road, staring at her.

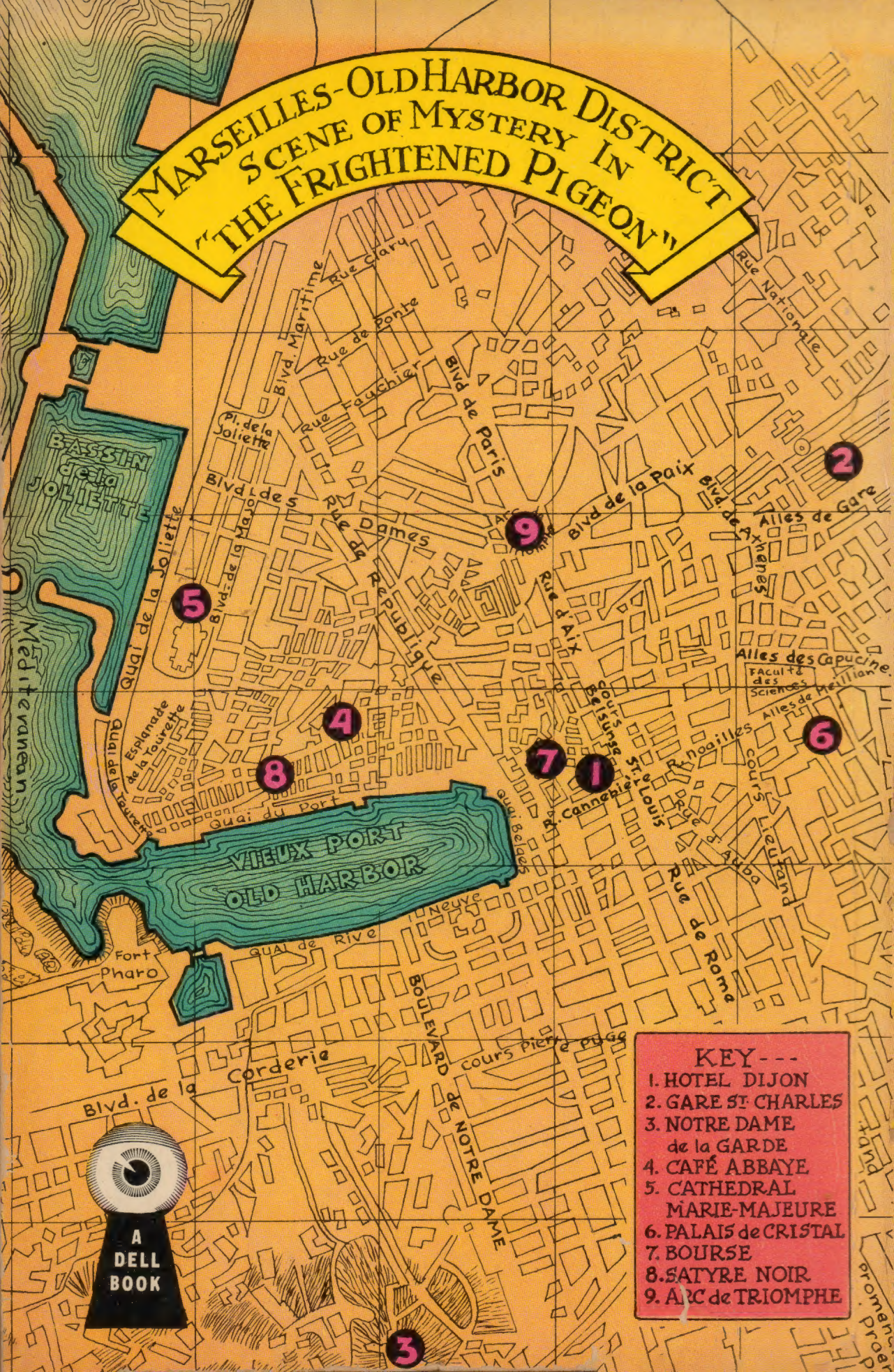
"Wait!" she called to Flebert and leaned out of the door. "Luis!" The boy shuffled over toward her. Val wanted to say something in farewell, but her voice choked up. She reached out and touched his cheek with her fingers. Then he smiled —the first smile Val had ever seen on his wan face.

"May the saints walk at your side, Señorita," he said. "And now, *adiós.*"

With Riego, he stood and watched the receding tail light until the car disappeared beyond a turn in the road. Then the Basque touched his arm and grunted.

"There is wine to be had at the house of my Uncle Miguel, which is not far away. I have the thirst."

The Spanish boy looked at him vaguely. "Good. Shall we be going?"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